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D. Torbett**

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THE CANADIAN
PHOTOPLAY TITLE OF
THE LAND OF PROMISE

*A Novelization of
W. Somerset Maugham's Play*

BY
D. TORBETT

ILLUSTRATED WITH SCENES
FROM THE PHOTOPLAY
A PARAMOUNT PICTURE
STARRING THOMAS MEIGHAN



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LOVE FOR HER HUSBAND IS FINALLY BORN IN NORA.

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THE LAND OF PROMISE

CHAPTER I

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Nora opened her eyes to an unaccustomed consciousness of well-being. She was dimly aware that it had its origin in something deeper than mere physical comfort; but for the moment, in that state between sleeping and wakening, which still held her, it was enough to find that body and mind seemed rested.

Youth was reasserting itself. And it was only a short time ago that she had felt that never, never, could she by any possible chance feel young again. When one is young, one resents the reaction after any strain not purely physical as if it were a premature symptom of old age.

A ray of brilliant sunshine, which found its way through a gap in the drawn curtains, showed that it was long past the usual hour for rising. She smiled whimsically and closed her eyes once more. She remembered now that she was not in her own little room in the other wing of the house. The curtains proved that. How often in the ten years she had been with Miss Wickham had she begged that the staring white window blind, which decorated her one window, be replaced by curtains or even a blind of a dark tone that she might not be awakened by the first ray of light. She had even ventured to propose that the cost of such alterations be stopped out of her salary. Miss Wickham had refused to countenance any such innovation.

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Three years before, when the offending blind had refused to hold together any longer, Nora had had a renewal of hope. But no! The new blind had been more glaringly white than its predecessor, which by contrast had taken on a grateful ivory tone in its old age. They had had one of their rare scenes at its advent. Nora had as a rule an admirable control of her naturally quick temper. But this had been too much.

"I might begin to understand your refusal if you ever entered my room. But since it would no more occur to you to do so than to visit the stables, I cannot see what possible difference it can make," Nora had stormed.

Miss Wickham's smile, which at the beginning of her companion's outburst had been faintly ironic, had broadened into the frankly humorous.

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"Stated with your characteristic regard for exactitude, my dear Miss Marsh, it would never enter my head to do either. I prefer the white blind, however. As you know, I have no taste for explanations. We will let the matter rest there, if you please." Then she had added: "Some day, I strongly suspect, some man will amuse himself breaking that fiery temper of yours. I wish I were not so old, I think that I should enjoy knowing that he had succeeded." And the incident had ended, as always, with a few angry tears on Nora's part, as a preliminary to the inevitable game of bezique which finished off each happy day!

And this had been her life for ten years! A wave of pity, not for herself but for that young girl of eighteen who had once been herself, that proudly confident young creature who, when suddenly deprived of the protection of her only parent,—Nora's father had died when she was too young to remember him,—had so bravely faced the world, serene in the consciousness that the happiness which was her right was sure to be hers after a little waiting, dimmed her eyes for a moment. The dreams she had dreamed after she had received Miss Wickham's letter offering her the post of companion! She recalled how she had smiled to herself when the agent with whom she had filed her application congratulated her warmly on her good fortune in placing herself so promptly, and, by way of benediction, had wished that she might hold the position for many years. Many years indeed! That had been no part of her plan. Those nebulous plans had always been consistently rose-colored. It was impossible to remember them all now.

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Sometimes the unknown Miss Wickham turned out to be a soft-hearted and sentimental old lady who was completely won by her young companion's charm and unmistakable air of good breeding. After a short time, she either adopted her, or, on dying, left her her entire fortune.

Again, she proved to be a perfect ogre. In this variation it was always the Prince Charming, that looms large in every young girl's dreams, who finally, after a brief period of unhappiness, came to the rescue and everything ended happily if somewhat conventionally.

The reality had been sadly different. Miss Wickham had disclosed herself as being a hard, self-centered, worldly woman who considered that in furnishing her young companion with board, lodging and a salary of thirty pounds a year, she had, to use a commercial phrase, obtained the option on her every waking hour, and indeed, during the last year of her life, she had extended this option to cover many of the hours which should have been dedicated to rest and sleep.

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All the fine plans that the young Nora had made while journeying down from London to Tunbridge Wells, for going on with her music, improving herself in French and perhaps taking up

another modern language, in her leisure hours, had been nipped in the bud before she had been an inmate of Miss Wickham's house many days. She had no leisure hours. Miss Wickham saw to that. She had apparently an abhorrence for her own unrelieved society that amounted to a positive mania. She must never be left alone. Let Nora but escape to her own little room in the vain hope of obtaining a few moments to herself, and Kate, the parlor maid, was certain to be sent after her.

"Miss Wickham's compliments and she was waiting to be read to." "Miss Wickham's compliments, but did Miss Marsh know that the horses were at the door?" "Miss Wickham's compliments, and should she have Kate set out the backgammon board?"

And upon the rare occasions when there was company in the house, Miss Wickham's ingenuity in providing occupation for dear Miss Marsh, while she was herself occupied with her friends, was inexhaustible. In an evil hour Nora had confessed to a modest talent for washing lace. Miss Wickham, it developed, had a really fine collection of beautiful pieces which naturally required the most delicate handling. Their need for being washed was oddly coincident with the moment when the expected guest arrived at the door.

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Or, it appeared that the slugs had attacked the rose trees in unusual numbers. The gardener was in despair as he was already behind with setting out the annuals. "Would Miss Marsh mind while Miss Wickham had her little after-luncheon nap—!" Miss Marsh did mind. She loved flowers; to arrange them was a delight—at least it had been once—but she hated slugs. But she was too young and too inexperienced to know how to combat the subtle encroachments upon her own time made by this selfish old woman. And so, gradually, she had found that she was not only companion, but a sort of superior lady's maid and assistant gardener as well. And all for thirty pounds a year and her keep.

And alas! Prince Charming had never appeared, unless—Nora laughed aloud at the thought—he had disguised himself with a cleverness defying detection. With Reginald Hornby, a callow youth, the son of Miss Wickham's dearest friend, who occasionally made the briefest of duty visits; Mr. Wynne, the family solicitor, an elderly bachelor; and the doctor's assistant, a young person by the name of Gard, Nora's list of eligible men was complete. There had been a time when Nora had flirted with the idea of escaping from bondage by becoming the wife of young Gard.

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He was a rather common young man, but he had been sincerely in love with her. He was not sufficiently subtle to recognize that it was the idea of escaping from Miss Wickham and the deadly monotony of her days that tempted her. He had laid his case before Miss Wickham. There had been some terrible scenes. Nora had felt the lash of her employer's bitter tongue. Partly because she was still smarting from the attack, and partly because she was indignant with her suitor for having gone to Miss Wickham at all and particularly without consulting her, she, too, had turned on the unfortunate young man. There had been mutual recriminations and reproaches, and young Gard, after his brief and bitter experience with the gentry, had left the vicinity of Tunbridge Wells and later on married a girl of his own class.

But Miss Wickham had been more shaken at the prospect of losing her young companion, who was so thoroughly broken in, than she would have liked to have confessed. She detested new faces about her, and as a matter of fact, she came as nearly caring for Nora as it was possible for her to care for any human being. She had told the girl then that it was her intention to make some provision for her at her death, so that she might have a decent competence and not be obliged to look for another position. There was, of course, the implied understanding that she would remain with Miss Wickham until that lady was summoned to a better and brighter world, a step which Miss Wickham, herself, was in no immediate hurry to take. In the meantime, she knew perfectly well just how often a prospective legacy could be dangled before expectant eyes with perfect delicacy.

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It furnished her with an additional weapon, too, against her nephew, James Wickham, and his wife, both of whom she cordially detested, although she fully intended leaving them the bulk of her fortune. The consideration and tenderness she showed toward Nora when Mr. and Mrs. Wickham ran down from London to see their dear aunt showed a latent talent for comedy, on the part of the chief actress, of no mean order. These occasions left Nora in a state of mind in which exasperation and amusement were about equally blended. It was amusing to note the signs of apprehension on the part of Miss Wickham's disagreeable relatives as they noted their aunt's doting fondness for her hired companion. And while she felt that they richly deserved this little punishment, it was humiliating to be so cynically made use of.

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And now it was all over. After a year of illness and gradual decline the end had come two days before. Nothing could induce Miss Wickham to have a professional nurse. The long strain and weeks of broken rest had told even on Nora's strength. Kindly Dr. Evans had insisted that she be put immediately to bed and Kate, the parlor maid, who had always been devoted to her, had undressed her as if she had been a baby. For the last two days she had done little but sleep the dreamless sleep of utter exhaustion. And to-day was the day of the funeral. She was just about to ring to find the time, when Kate's gentle knock came at the door.

"Come in. Good morning, Kate. Do tell me the time. Oh! How good it is to be lazy once in a while."

"Good morning to you, Miss. I hope you're feeling a bit rested. It's just gone eleven. Dr. Evans has called, Miss. He told me to see if you had waked."

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"How good of him. Ask him to wait a few moments and I'll come right down." 'Coming right down' was not so easy a matter as she had thought. Nora found herself strangely weak and languid. She was still sitting on the edge of her bed, trying to gather energy for the task of dressing, when Kate returned.

"I beg your pardon, Miss, but Dr. Evans says you're not to get up until he sees you. I'm to bring you a bit of toast and your tea and to help you freshen up a bit and then he will come up in twenty minutes. He says to tell you that he has plenty of time."

Nora made a show of protest. Secretly she was rather glad to give in. She had not reckoned with the weakness following two unaccustomed days in bed. Dr. Evans was a kindly elderly man, whose one affectation was the gruffness which the country doctor of the old school so often assumes as if he wished to emphasize his disapproval of the modern suave manner of his city *confrère*. He had a sardonic humor and a sharp tongue which had at first quite terrified Nora, until she discovered that they were meant to hide the most generous heart in the world. Many were the kindly acts he performed in secret for the very people he was most accustomed to abuse.

Having felt Nora's pulse and looked at her sharply with his keen gray eyes, he settled the question of her attendance at Miss Wickham's funeral with his accustomed finality. [Pg 11]

"You'll do nothing of the sort," he growled. "You may get up after a while and go and sit in the garden a bit; the air is fairly spring-like. But this afternoon you must lie down again for an hour or two. I suppose you'll have to get up to do the civil for James Wickham and his wife before they go back to town. Oh, no! they'll not stay the night. They'll rush back as fast as the train will take them, once they've heard the will read. Couldn't bear the associations with the place, now that their dear aunt has departed!" He gave one of his sardonic chuckles.

"It may be nonsense"—this in reply to Nora's remonstrance—"but I'm not going to have you on my hands next. You'll go to that funeral and get hysterical like all women, and begin to think that you wish her back. I should think this last year would have been about all anyone would want. But you're a poor sentimental creature, after all," he jeered.

"I'm nothing of the sort. But I did feel sorry for her, badly as she often treated me. She was a desperately lonely old soul. Nobody cared a bit about her, really, and she knew it."

"In spite of all her little amiable tricks to make people love her," said the doctor. "Now, remember, the garden for an hour this morning, the drawing-room later in the day, after you've rested for an hour or so. And don't dare disobey me." With that, he left. [Pg 12]

It was pleasant in the garden. The air, though chilly, held the promise of spring. Warmly wrapped in an old cape, which the thoughtful Kate had discovered somewhere, with a book on Paris and some Italian sketches to fall back upon when her own thoughts ceased to divert her, Nora sat in a sheltered corner and looked out on the border which would soon be gay with the tulips whose green stocks were just beginning to push themselves up through the brown earth. Poor Miss Wickham! She had been so proud of her garden always. But for her it had bloomed for the last time. Would the James Wickhams take as much pride in it? Somehow, she fancied not. And she? Where would she be a year from now? A year! Where would she be in another month?

The whole world, in a modest sense, would be hers to choose from. While she had no definite notion as to the amount of her legacy, she had understood that it would bring in sufficient income to keep her from the necessity of seeking further employment. Probably something between two and three hundred pounds a year. She had always longed to travel. Italy, France, Germany, Spain, she would see them all. One could live very reasonably in really good pensions abroad, she had been told. [Pg 13]

And then, some day, after a few years of happy wandering, she might adventure to that far-off Canada where her only brother was living the life of a frontiersman on an incredibly huge farm. She had not seen him for many years, but her heart warmed at the thought of seeing her only relative again. He was much older. Yes, Eddie must now be about forty. Oh, all of that. She, herself, was almost twenty-eight. But she wouldn't go to him for several years. He had done one thing which seemed to her quite dreadful. He had made an unfortunate marriage with a woman far beneath him socially. Men were so weak! Because they fancied themselves lonely, or even captivated by a pretty face, they were willing to make impossible marriages. Women were different. Still, she had the grace to blush when she recalled the episode of the doctor's assistant.

Yes, she would go out to Eddie after his wife had had the chance to form herself a little more. Living with a husband so much superior was bound to have its influence. And she must have some really good qualities at bottom or she could never have attracted him. There was nothing vicious about her brother. She must write him of Miss Wickham's death. They were neither of them fond of writing. It must be nearly a year since she had heard from him last. And then, it was so difficult to keep up a correspondence when people had no mutual friends and so little in common. [Pg 14]

A glance at her watch told her that it must be nearly time for the London Wickhams to arrive. It would be better not to see them, unless they sent for her, until after they had returned from the cemetery. They were just the sort of people to think that she was forgetting her position if she had the manner of playing hostess by receiving them. Thank goodness! she would probably never see them again after to-day.

With a word to Kate that she would presently have her luncheon in her room and then rest for a few hours until the people returned after the funeral, she made her way to her own bare little room. How cold and bare it was! With the exception of the framed pictures of her father and mother and a small photograph of Eddie, taken before he had gone out, there was nothing but the absolutely necessary furniture. Miss Wickham's ideas of what a 'companion's' room should be like had partaken of the austere. And all the rest of the house was so crowded and overloaded with things. The drawing-room had always been an eyesore to Nora, crammed as it was with little tables and cabinets containing china. And in every available space there were porcelain ornaments and photographs in huge silver frames. It was all like a badly arranged museum or a huddled little curio shop. Well, she would soon be done with that, too!

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Armed with her portfolio and writing materials Nora returned to the guest chamber, which was her temporary abode. The motherly Kate was waiting with an appetizing lunch on a neat tray. What a good friend she had been. She would be genuinely sorry to part with Kate. She must ask her to give her some address that would always reach her. Who knew, years hence when she returned to England, but what she might afford to set up a modest flat with Kate to manage things for her. She would speak to her on the morrow—after the will was read.

"Ah, Kate, you knew just what would tempt me. Thank you so much! By the way, has Miss Pringle sent any message?"

"Yes, Miss. Miss Pringle stopped on her way to the village a moment ago. She was with Mrs. Hubbard and had only a moment. I was to tell you that she would call this afternoon and hoped you could see her. I told her, Miss, that the doctor had said you were not to go to the burial. She will come while they are away."

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"Let me know the moment she comes. I want to see her very much."

Miss Pringle was the only woman friend Nora had made in the years of her sojourn at Tunbridge Wells. They had little in common beyond the fellow-feeling that binds those in bondage. Miss Pringle was also a companion. Her task mistress, Mrs. Hubbard, was in Nora's opinion, about as stolidly brainless as a woman could well be. Miss Pringle was always lauding her kindness. But then Miss Pringle had been a companion to various rich women for thirty years. Nora had her own ideas as to the value of the opinions of any woman who had been in slavery for thirty years.

Having eaten her luncheon and written her letter to her brother, she felt glad to rest once more. How wise the doctor had been to forbid her to go to the funeral, and how grateful she was that he had forbidden it, was her last waking thought.

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CHAPTER II

It was well on to three o'clock when Miss Pringle made her careful way up the path that led to the late Miss Wickham's door.

"How strange it will be not to find her in her own drawing-room!" she reflected. "I don't recall that Nora Marsh and I have ever been alone together for two consecutive minutes in our lives. I simply couldn't have stood it."

"I'll tell Miss Marsh you're here, Miss Pringle," said Kate, at the door.

"How is she to-day, Kate?"

"Still tired out, poor thing. The doctor made her promise to lie down directly after she had had a bite of luncheon. But she said I was to let her know the moment you came, Miss."

"I'm very glad she didn't go to the funeral."

"Dr. Evans simply wouldn't hear of it, Miss."

"I wonder how she stood it all these months, waiting on Miss Wickham hand and foot. She should have been made to have a professional nurse."

"It wasn't very easy to make Miss Wickham have anything she had made up her mind not to, you know that, Miss," said Kate as she led the way to the drawing-room. "Miss Marsh slept in Miss Wickham's room towards the last, and the moment she fell asleep Miss Wickham would have her up because her pillow wanted shaking or she was thirsty, or something."

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"I suppose she was very inconsiderate."

Miss Pringle did not in general approve of discussing things with servants. But Nora had told her frequently how faithfully Kate looked after her and, as far as it was possible, made things bearable, so she felt she could make an exception of her.

"Inconsiderate isn't the word, Miss. I wouldn't be a lady's companion," Kate paused, her hand on the doorknob, to make a sweeping gesture, "not for anything. What they have to put up with!"

"Everyone isn't like Miss Wickham," said Miss Pringle, a trifle sharply. "The lady I'm companion to, Mrs. Hubbard, is kindness itself."

"That sounds like Miss Marsh coming down the stairs now," said Kate, opening the door. "Miss Pringle is here, Miss."

As Kate closed the door behind her, Nora advanced to meet her friend from the doorway with her pretty smile and outstretched hand. Miss Pringle kissed her warmly and then drew her down on a large sofa by her side. Her glance had a certain note of disapproval as it took in her friend's black dress, which did not escape that observant young person.

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"I was so glad to hear you were coming to me this afternoon; it is good of you. How did you escape the dragon?"

She had long ago nicknamed the excellent Mrs. Hubbard 'the dragon' simply to tease Miss Pringle.

"Mrs. Hubbard has gone for a drive with somebody or other and didn't want me," said Miss Pringle primly. "You haven't been crying, Nora?"

"Yes, I couldn't help it. My dear, it's not unnatural."

Miss Pringle dropped the hand she had been stroking to clasp both her own over the handle of her umbrella. "Well, I don't like to say anything against her now she's dead, poor thing, but Miss Wickham was the most detestable old woman I ever met."

"Still," said Nora slowly, looking toward the French window which opened on the garden, at the sun streaming through the drawn blinds, "I don't suppose one can live so long with anyone and not be a little sorry to part with them forever. I was Miss Wickham's companion for ten years."

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"How you stood it! Exacting, domineering, disagreeable!"

"Yes, I suppose she was. Because she paid me a salary, she thought I wasn't a human being. I certainly never knew anyone with such a bitter tongue. At first I used to cry every night when I went to bed because of the things she said to me. But I got used to them."

"I wonder you didn't leave her. I would have." Miss Pringle attempting to delude herself with the idea that she was a mettlesome, high-spirited person who would stand no nonsense, was immensely diverting to Nora. To hide an irrepressible smile, she went over to a bowl of roses which stood on one of the little tables and pretended to busy herself with their rearrangement.

"Posts as lady's companions are not so easy to find, I fancy. At least I remember that when I got this one I was thought to be extremely lucky not to have to wait twice as long. I don't imagine things have bettered much in our line, do you?"

"That they have not," rejoined Miss Pringle gloomily. "They tell me the agents' books are full of people wanting situations. Before I went to Mrs. Hubbard I was out of one for nearly two years." Her voice shook a little at the recollection. Her poor, tired, weather-beaten face quivered as if she were about to cry.

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"It's not so had for you," said Nora soothingly. "You can always go and stay with your brother."

"You've a brother, too."

"Ah, yes. But he's farming in Canada. He has all he could do to keep himself. He couldn't keep me, too."

"How is he doing now?" asked Miss Pringle, to whom any new topic of conversation was of interest. She had so little opportunity for conversation at the irreproachable Mrs. Hubbard's, that lady having apparently inherited a limited set of ideas from her late husband, 'as Mr. Hubbard used to say' being her favorite introduction to any topic. Miss Pringle saw herself making quite a little success at dinner that night—there was to be a guest, she believed—by saying: "A friend of mine has just been telling me of the success her brother is having way out in Canada." "He is getting on?" she asked encouragingly.

"Oh, he's doing very well. He's got a farm of his own. He wrote over a few years ago and told me he could always give me a home if I wanted one."

"Canada's so far off," observed Miss Pringle deprecatingly. Her tone seemed to imply that there were other disadvantages which she would refrain from mentioning.

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Now while Nora had always had the same vague feeling that Canada, in addition to being an immense distance off, was not quite, well, it wasn't England—that was indisputable—she found herself unreasonably irritated by her friend's tone.

"Not when you get there," she replied sharply.

Miss Pringle evidently deemed it best to change the subject. "Why don't you draw the blinds?" she asked after a moment.

"It is horrid, isn't it? But somehow I thought I ought to wait till they came back from the funeral. But just see the sunlight; it must be beautiful out of doors. Why don't we walk about in the garden? Do you care for a wrap? I'll send Kate to fetch you something, if you do."

Miss Pringle having decided that her coat was sufficiently warm if they did not sit anywhere too long and just walked in the paths where it was sure not to be damp, they went out of the gloomy

drawing-room into the bright afternoon sunshine.

"Don't you love a garden when things are just beginning to show their heads? I sometimes think that spring is the most beautiful of all the seasons. It's like watching the birth of a new world. I think the most human thing about poor Miss Wickham was her fondness for flowers. She always said she hoped she'd never die in winter."

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To Miss Pringle, the note of regret which crept now and again into Nora's voice when she spoke of her late employer was a continual source of bewilderment. Here was a woman who she knew had a quick temper and a passionate nature speaking as if she actually sorrowed for the tyrant who had so frequently made her life unbearable. She was sure that she couldn't have felt more grieved if Providence had seen fit to remove the excellent Mrs. Hubbard from the scene of her earthly activities. Poor Miss Pringle! She did not realize that after thirty years of a life passed as a hired companion that she no longer possessed either sensibility or the power of affection. To her, one employer would be very like another so long as they were fairly considerate and not too unreasonable. It would be tiresome, to be sure, to have to learn the little likes and dislikes of Mrs. Hubbard's successor. But what would you? Life was filled with tiresome moments. Poor Miss Pringle!

Her next remark was partly to make conversation and partly because she might obtain further light upon this perplexing subject. She made a mental note that she must not forget to speak to Mrs. Hubbard of Nora's grief over Miss Wickham's death. Naturally, she would be gratified.

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"Well, it must be a great relief to you now it's all over," she said.

"Sometimes I can't realize it," said Nora simply. "These last few weeks I hardly got to bed at all, and when the end came I was utterly exhausted. For two days I have done nothing but sleep. Poor Miss Wickham. She did hate dying."

Miss Pringle had a sort of triumph. She had proved her point. Even Mrs. Hubbard could not doubt it now! "That's the extraordinary part of it. I believe you were really fond of her."

"Do you know that for nearly a year she would eat nothing but what I gave her with my own hands. And she liked me as much as she was capable of liking anybody."

"That wasn't much," Miss Pringle permitted herself.

"And then I was so dreadfully sorry for her."

"Good heavens!"

"She'd been a hard and selfish woman all her life, and there was no one who cared for her," Nora went on passionately. "It seemed so dreadful to die like that and leave not a soul to regret one. Her nephew and his wife were just waiting for her death. It was dreadful. Each time they came down from London I could see them looking at her to see if she was any worse than when last they'd seen her."

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"Well," said Miss Pringle with a sort of splendid defiance, "I thought her a horrid old woman, and I'm glad she's dead. And I only hope she's left you well provided for."

"Oh, I think she's done that," Nora smiled happily into her friend's face. "Yes, I can be quite sure of that, I fancy. Two years ago, when I—when I nearly went away, she said she'd left me enough to live on."

They walked on for a moment or two in silence until they had reached the end of the path, where there was a little arbor in which Miss Wickham had been in the habit of having her tea afternoons when the weather permitted.

"Do you think we would run any risk if we sat down here a few moments? Suppose we try it. We can walk again if you feel in the least chilled. I think the view so lovely from here. Besides, I can see the carriage the moment it enters the gate."

Miss Pringle sat down with the air of a person who was hardly conscious of what she was doing.

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"You say she told you she had left you something when you nearly went away," she went on in the hesitating manner of one who has been interrupted while reading aloud and is not quite sure that she has resumed at the right place. "You mean when that assistant of Dr. Evans wanted to marry you? I'm glad you wouldn't have him."

"He was very kind and—and nice," said Nora gently. "But, of course, he wasn't a gentleman."

"I shouldn't like to live with a man at all," retorted Miss Pringle, with unshakable conviction. "I think they're horrid; but of course it would be utterly impossible if he weren't a gentleman."

Nora's eyes twinkled with amusement; she gave a little gurgle of laughter. "He came to see Miss Wickham, but she wouldn't have anything to do with him. First, she said she couldn't spare me, and then she said that I had a very bad temper."

"I like *her* saying that," retorted her listener.

"It's quite true," said Nora with a deprecating wave of her hand. "Every now and then I felt I couldn't put up with her any more. I forgot that I was dependent on her, and that if she dismissed me, I probably shouldn't be able to find another situation, and I just flew at her. I must say she

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was very nice about it; she used to look at me and grin, and when it was all over, say: 'My dear, when you marry, if your husband's a wise man, he'll use a big stick now and then.'

"Old cat!"

"I should like to see any man try it," said Nora with emphasis.

Miss Pringle dismissed the supposition with a wave of her hand. "How much do you think she's left you?" she asked eagerly.

"Well, of course I don't know; the will is going to be read this afternoon, when they come back from the funeral. But from what she said, I believe about two hundred and fifty pounds a year."

"It's the least she could do. She's had the ten best years of your life." Nora gave a long, happy sigh. "Just think of it! Never to be at anybody's beck and call again. I shall be able to get up when I like and go to bed when I like, go out when I choose and come in when I choose. Think of what that means!"

"Unless you marry—you probably will," said Miss Pringle in a discouraging tone.

"Never."

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"What do you purpose doing?"

"I shall go to Italy, Florence, Rome; oh, everywhere I've so longed to go. Do you think it's horrible of me? I'm so happy!"

"My dear child!" said Miss Pringle with real feeling.

At that moment the sound of carriage wheels came to them. Turning quickly, Nora saw the carriage containing Mr. and Mrs. Wickham coming up the drive. "There they are now. How the time has gone!"

"I'd better go, hadn't I?" said Miss Pringle with manifest reluctance.

"I'm afraid you must: I'm sorry."

"Couldn't I go up to your room and wait there? I do so want to know about the will."

Nora hesitated a moment. She didn't want to take Miss Pringle up to her bare little room. A sort of loyalty to the woman who was, after all, to be her benefactress—for was she not, after all, with her legacy, going to make the happy future pay rich interest for the unhappy past?—made her reluctant to let anyone know how poorly she had been lodged.

"No," she said; "I'll tell you what, stay here in the garden. They want to catch the four-something back to London. And, later, we can have a cozy little tea all by ourselves."

"Very well. Oh, my dear," said Miss Pringle with emotion, "I'm so sincerely happy in your good luck!"

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Nora was genuinely moved. She leaned over and kissed Miss Pringle, her eyes filling with quick tears.

Then she went into the house. The Wickhams were already in the drawing-room. Mrs. James Wickham was a pretty young woman, a good ten years younger than her unattractive husband. Of the two, Nora preferred Mr. Wickham. There was a certain cynicism about her insincerity which his, somehow, lacked. Even now, they wore their rue with a difference.

Mrs. Wickham's mourning was as correct and elegant as a fashionable dressmaker could make it; the very latest thing in grief. Mr. Wickham was far less sumptuous. Beyond the customary band on his hat and a pair of black gloves conspicuously new, he had apparently made little expenditure on his costume. As Nora entered, Mrs. Wickham was pulling off her gloves.

"How do you do?" she said carelessly. "Ouf! Do put the blinds up, Miss Marsh. Really, we needn't be depressed any more. Jim, if you love me, take those gloves off. They're perfectly revolting."

"Why, what's wrong with them! The fellow in the shop told me they were the right thing."

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"No doubt; I never saw anyone look quite so funereal as you do."

"Well," retorted her husband, "you didn't want me to get myself up as if I were going to a wedding, did you?"

"Were there many people?" said Nora hastily.

The insolence of Mrs. Wickham's glance was scarcely veiled.

"Oh, quite a lot," she drawled. "The sort of people who indulge in other peoples' funerals as a mild form of dissipation."

"I hope Wynne will look sharp," said her husband hastily, looking at his watch. "I don't want to miss that train."

"Who were all those stodgy old things who wrung your hand afterwards, Jim?" asked his wife. She was moving slowly about the room picking up the various little objects scattered about and

examining the contents of one of the cabinets with the air of an appraiser.

"I can't think. They did make me feel such a fool."

"Oh, was that it?" laughed his wife. "I saw you looking a perfect owl and I thought you were giving a very bad imitation of restrained emotion."

"Dorothy!" in a tone of remonstrance.

"Would you care for some tea, Mrs. Wickham?" Nora broke in. To her the whole scene was positively indecent. She longed to make her escape, but felt that it would be considered part of her duty to remain as long as the Wickhams stayed. As she was about to ring the bell, Mrs. Wickham stopped her with a gesture.

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"Well, you might send some in so that it'll be ready when Mr. Wynne comes. We'll ring for you, shall we?" she added. "I dare say you've got one or two things you want to do now."

"Very good, Mrs. Wickham."

Nora could feel her cheeks burn as she left the room. But she was thankful to escape. Outside the door she hesitated for a moment. There was no good in rejoining Miss Pringle as yet. She had no news for her. She hoped Mr. Wynne would not be delayed much longer. The Wickhams could not possibly be more anxious to get back to London than she was to have them go. How gratuitously insolent that woman was. Thank Heaven, she need never see her again after to-day. Of course, she was furious because she suspected that the despised companion was to be a beneficiary under the will. How could anyone be so mean as to begrudge her her well-earned share in so large a fortune! Well, the coming hour would tell the tale.

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On the table in her room was the letter to her brother which she had forgotten to send to the post. Slipping down the stairs again, she went in search of Kate to see if it were too late to send it to the village. Now that it was written, she had almost a superstitious feeling that it was important that it should catch the first foreign mail.

As she passed the door of the drawing-room, she could hear James Wickham's voice raised above its normal pitch. Were they already quarreling over the spoils!

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CHAPTER III

Nora's surmise had been very nearly correct; the Wickhams were quarreling, but not, as yet, over the spoils. James Wickham had waited until the door had closed behind his aunt's companion to rebuke his wife's untimely frivolity.

"I say, Dorothy, you oughtn't to be facetious before Miss Marsh. She was extremely attached to Aunt Louisa."

"Oh, what nonsense!" jeered Mrs. Wickham, throwing herself pettishly into a chair. "I find it's always a very good rule to judge people by oneself, and I'm positive she was just longing for the old lady to die."

"She was awfully upset at the end, you know that yourself."

"Nerves! Men are so idiotic. They never understand that there are tears *and* tears. I cried myself, and Heaven knows I didn't regret her death."

"My dear Dorothy, you oughtn't to say that."

"Why not?" retorted his wife. "It's perfectly true. Aunt Louisa was a detestable person and no one would have stood her for a minute if she hadn't had money. I can't see the use of being a hypocrite *now* that it can't make any difference either way. Oh, why doesn't that man hurry up!" She resumed once more her impatient walk about the room.

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"I wish Wynne would come," said her husband, glad to change the subject, particularly as he felt that he had failed to be very impressive. "It'll be beastly inconvenient if we miss that train," he finished, glancing again at his watch.

"And another thing," said Mrs. Wickham, turning sharply as she reached the end of the room, "I don't trust that Miss Marsh. She looks as if she knew what was in the will."

"I don't for a moment suppose she does. Aunt Louisa wasn't the sort of person to talk."

"Nevertheless, I'm sure she knows she's been left something."

"Oh, well, I think she has the right to expect that. Aunt Louisa led her a dog's life."

Mrs. Wickham made an angry gesture. "She had her wages and a comfortable home. If she didn't like the place, she could have left it," she said pettishly. "After all," she went on in a quieter tone, "it's family money. In my opinion, Aunt Louisa had no right to leave it to strangers."

"I don't think we ought to complain if Miss Marsh gets a small annuity," said her husband soothingly. "I understand Aunt Louisa promised her something of the sort when she had a chance

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of marrying a couple of years ago."

"Miss Marsh is still quite young. It isn't as if she had been here for thirty years," protested Mrs. Wickham.

"Well, anyway, I've got an idea that Aunt Louisa meant to leave her about two hundred and fifty a year."

"Two hundred and fifty— But what's the estate amount to; have you any idea?"

"About nineteen thousand pounds, I believe."

Mrs. Wickham, who had seated herself once more, struck her hands violently together.

"Oh, it's absurd. It's a most unfair proposition. It will make *all* the difference to us. On that extra two hundred and fifty a year we could keep a car."

"My dear, be thankful if we get anything at all," said her husband solemnly. For a moment she stared at him aghast.

"Jim! Jim, you don't think— Oh! that would be too horrible."

"Hush! Take care."

He crossed to the window as the door opened and Kate came in softly with the tea things.

"How lucky it is that we had a fine day," he said, endeavoring to give the impression that they had been talking with becoming sobriety of light topics. He hoped his wife's raised voice had not been heard in the passageway. [Pg 36]

But Mrs. Wickham was beyond caring. Her toneless "Yes" in response to his original observation betrayed her utter lack of interest in the subject. But as Kate was still busy setting out the things on a small table, he continued his efforts. Really, Dorothy should 'play up' more.

"It looks as if we were going to have a spell of fine weather."

"Yes."

"It's funny how often it rains for weddings."

"Very funny."

"The tea is ready, sir."

As Kate left the room, Mrs. Wickham crossed slowly over to where her husband was standing in front of the window leading to the garden. Her voice shook with emotion. It was evident that she was very near tears. He put his arm around her awkwardly, but with a certain suggestion of protective tenderness.

"I've been counting on that money for years," she said, hardly above a whisper. "I used to dream at night that I was reading a telegram with the news of Aunt Louisa's death. And I've thought of all we should be able to do when we get it. It'll make such a difference." [Pg 37]

"You know what she was. She didn't care twopence for us. We ought to be prepared for the worst," he said soberly.

"Do you think she could have left everything to Miss Marsh?"

"I shouldn't be greatly surprised."

"We'll dispute the will," she said, once more raising her voice. "It's undue influence. I suspected Miss Marsh from the beginning. I hate her. Oh, how I hate her! Oh, why doesn't Wynne come?"

A ring at the bell answered her.

"Here he is, I expect."

"The suspense is too awful."

"Pull yourself together, old girl," said Wickham, patting his wife encouragingly on the shoulder. "And I say, look a bit dismal. After all, we've just come from a funeral."

Mrs. Wickham gave a sort of suppressed wail. "Oh, I'm downhearted enough, Heaven knows."

"Mr. Wynne, sir," said Kate from the doorway.

Mr. Wynne, the late Miss Wickham's solicitor, was a jovial, hearty man, tallish, bald and ruddy-looking. In his spare time he played at being a country gentleman. He had a fine, straightforward eye and a direct manner that inspired one with confidence. He was dressed in complimentary mourning, but for the moment his natural hearty manner threatened to get the better of him. [Pg 38]

"Helloa," he said, holding out his hand to Wickham. But the sight of Mrs. Wickham, seated on the sofa dejectedly enough, recalled to him that he should be more subdued in the presence of such genuine grief. He crossed the room to take Dorothy's hand solemnly.

"I didn't have an opportunity of shaking hands with you at the cemetery."

"How do you do," she said rather absently.

"Pray accept my sincerest sympathy on your great bereavement."

Mrs. Wickham made an effort to bring her mind back from the all-absorbing fear that possessed her.

"Of course the end was not entirely unexpected."

"No, I know. But it must have been a great shock, all the same."

He was going on to say what a wonderful old lady his late client had been in that her faculties seemed perfectly unimpaired until the very last, when Wickham interrupted him. Not only was he most anxious to hear the will read himself and have it over, but he saw signs in his wife's face and in the nervous manner in which she rolled and unrolled her handkerchief, that she was nearing the end of her self-control, never very great.

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"My wife was very much upset, but of course my poor aunt had suffered great pain, and we couldn't help looking upon it as a happy release."

"Naturally," responded the solicitor sympathetically. "And how is Miss Marsh?" He was looking at James Wickham as he spoke, so that he missed the sudden 'I told you so' glance which Mrs. Wickham flashed at her husband.

"Oh, she's very well," she managed to say with a careless air.

"I'm glad to learn that she is not completely prostrated," said Mr. Wynne warmly. "Her devotion to Miss Wickham was perfectly wonderful. Dr. Evans—he's my brother-in-law, you know—told me no trained nurse could have been more competent. She was like a daughter to Miss Wickham."

"I suppose we'd better send for her," said Mrs. Wickham coldly.

"Have you brought the——" Wickham stopped in embarrassment.

"Yes, I have it in my pocket," said the solicitor quickly. He had noted before now how awkward people always were about speaking of wills. There was nothing indelicate about doing so. Heavens, all right-minded persons made their wills and they meant to have them read after they were dead. Everybody knew that, and yet they always acted as if it were indecent to approach the subject. He had no patience with such nonsense.

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With an eloquent look at her husband, Mrs. Wickham slowly crossed the room to the bell.

"I'll ring for Miss Marsh," she said in a hard voice.

"I expect Mr. Wynne would like a cup of tea, Dorothy."

She frowned at her husband behind the solicitor's broad back. More delays. Could she bear it? "Oh, I'm so sorry, I quite forgot about it."

"No, thank you very much, I never take tea," protested that gentleman. He took from his pocket a long blue envelope and slowly drew from it the will, which he smoothed out with a deliberation which was maddening to Mrs. Wickham. She could hardly tear her fascinated eyes away from it long enough to tell the waiting Kate to ask Miss Marsh to be good enough to come to them.

"What's the time, Jim?" she asked nervously.

"Oh, there's no hurry," he said, looking at his watch without seeing it. Then turning to Wynne, he added: "We've got an important engagement this evening in London and we're very anxious not to miss the fast train."

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"The train service down here is rotten," said Mrs. Wickham harshly.

"That's all right. The will is very short. It won't take me two minutes to read it," Mr. Wynne reassured them.

"What on earth is Miss Marsh doing?" said Mrs. Wickham, half to herself. An endless minute passed.

"How pretty the garden is looking now," said the solicitor cheerfully, gazing out through the window.

"Very," Wickham managed to say.

"Miss Wickham was always so interested in her garden."

"Yes."

"My own tulips aren't so advanced as those."

"Aren't they?" Wickham's tone suggested irritation.

Mr. Wynne addressed his next observation to Mrs. Wickham.

"Are you interested in gardening?"

"No, I hate it. At last!"

The exclamation was called forth by the appearance of Nora in the doorway. The two men both rose; Wynne to go forward and shake Nora's hand with unaffected cordiality, Wickham to whisper in his wife's ear, beseeching her to exercise more self-control.

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"How do you do, Miss Marsh? I'm rejoiced to see you looking so fit."

"Oh, I'm very well, thank you. How do you do?"

"Will you have a cup of tea?" asked Wickham in response to what he thought was a signal from his wife.

But Mrs. Wickham had reached the point where further waiting was simply impossible.

"Jim," she remonstrated, "Miss Marsh would much prefer to have tea quietly after we're gone."

Nora understood and for the moment found it in her heart to be sorry for the woman, much as she disliked her.

"I won't have any tea, thank you," she said simply.

"Mr. Wynne has brought the will with him," explained Mrs. Wickham. Her tone was almost appealing as if she begged Nora if she knew of its contents to say so without further delay.

"Oh, yes?"

Nothing should induce her to show such agitation as this woman did. She managed to assume an air of polite interest and find a chair for herself quite calmly. And yet she was conscious that her heart was beating wildly beneath her bodice. But she would not betray herself, she would not. And yet her stake was as great as any. Her whole future hung on the contents of that paper Mr. Wynne was caressing with his long fingers.

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"Miss Marsh," questioned Mr. Wynne as soon as she was seated, "so far as you know there is no other will?"

"How do you mean?"

"Miss Wickham didn't make a later one—without my assistance, I mean? You know of nothing in the house, for instance?"

"Oh, no," said Nora positively. "Miss Wickham always said you had her will. She was extremely methodical."

"I feel I ought to ask you," the solicitor went on with unwonted gentleness, "because Miss Wickham consulted me a couple of years ago about making a new will. She told me what she wanted to do, but gave me no actual instructions to draw it. I thought perhaps she might have done it herself."

"I heard nothing about it. I am sure that her only will is in your hands."

"Then I think that we may take it that this——"

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Mrs. Wickham's set face relaxed. The light of triumph was in her eyes. She understood.

"When was that will made?" she asked eagerly.

"Eight or nine years ago. The exact date was March 4th, 1904."

The date settled it. Nora, too, realized that. She was left penniless. What a refinement of cruelty to deceive—but she must not think of that now. She would have all the rest of her life in which to think of it. But here before that woman, whose searching glance was even now fastened on her face to see how she was taking the blow, she would give no sign.

"When did you first come to Miss Wickham?" Mrs. Wickham's voice was almost a caress.

"At the end of nineteen hundred and three." There was no trace of emotion in that clear voice. After a moment Mr. Wynne spoke again.

"Shall I read it, or would you just like to know the particulars? It is very short."

"Oh, let us know just roughly." Mrs. Wickham was still eager.

"Well, Miss Wickham left one hundred pounds to the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel, and one hundred pounds to the General Hospital at Tunbridge Wells, and the entire residue of her fortune to her nephew, Mr. James Wickham."

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Mrs. Wickham drew her breath sharply. Once more she looked at her late aunt's companion, but nothing was to be read in that calm face. She was a designing minx, none the less. But she did yield her a grudging admiration, for her self-control in the shipwreck of all her hopes. Now they could have their car. Oh, what couldn't they have! She felt she had earned every penny of it in that last dreadful half hour.

"And Miss Marsh?" she heard her husband ask.

"Miss Marsh is not mentioned."

Somehow, Nora managed a smile. "I could hardly expect to be. At the time that will was drawn I

had been Miss Wickham's companion for only a few months."

"That is why I asked whether you knew of any later will," said Mr. Wynne almost sadly. "When I talked to Miss Wickham on the subject she said her wish was to make adequate provision for you after her death. I think she had spoken to you about it."

"Yes, she had."

"She mentioned three hundred a year."

"That was very kind of her." Nora's voice broke a little. "I'm glad she wished to do something for me." [Pg 46]

"Oddly enough," continued the solicitor, "she spoke about it to Dr. Evans only a few days before she died."

"Perhaps there is a later will somewhere," said Wickham.

"I honestly don't think so."

"Oh, I'm sure there isn't," affirmed Nora.

"Dr. Evans was talking to Miss Wickham about Miss Marsh. She was completely tired out and he wanted Miss Wickham to have a professional nurse. She told him then that I *had* the will and that she had left Miss Marsh amply provided for."

"That isn't legal, of course," said Mrs. Wickham decidedly.

"What isn't?"

"I mean no one could force us—I mean the will stands as it is, doesn't it?"

"Certainly it does."

"I'm afraid it's a great disappointment to you, Miss Marsh," Wickham said, not unkindly.

"I never count my chickens before they're hatched." This time Nora smiled easily and naturally. The worst was over now.

"It would be very natural if Miss Marsh were disappointed in the circumstances. I think she'd been led to expect——" Mr. Wynne's voice was almost pleading. [Pg 47]

Mrs. Wickham detected a certain disapproval in the tone. She hastened to justify herself. He might still be useful. When the estate was once settled, they would of course put everything in the hands of their London solicitor. But it would be better not to antagonize him for the moment.

"Our aunt left a very small fortune, I understand, and I suppose she felt it wouldn't be fair to leave a large part of it away from her own family."

"Of course," said her husband, following her lead, "it is family money. She inherited it from my grandfather, and—but I want you to know, Miss Marsh, that my wife and I thoroughly appreciate all you did for my aunt. Money couldn't repay your care and devotion. You've been perfectly wonderful."

"It's extremely good of you to say so."

"I think everyone who saw Miss Marsh with Miss Wickham must be aware that during the ten years she was with her she never spared herself." Mr. Wynne's eyes were on Mrs. Wickham.

"Of course my aunt was a very trying woman——" began James Wickham feebly. His wife headed him off. [Pg 48]

"Earning one's living is always unpleasant; if it weren't there'd be no incentive to work."

This astonishing aphorism was almost too much for Nora's composure. She gave Mrs. Wickham an amused glance, to which that lady responded by beaming upon her in her most agreeable manner.

"My wife and I would be very glad to make some kind of acknowledgment of your services."

"I was just going to mention it," echoed Mrs. Wickham heartily.

Mr. Wynne's kindly face brightened visibly. He was glad they were going to do the right thing, after all. He had been a little fearful a few moments before. "I felt sure that in the circumstances ___"

But Mrs. Wickham interrupted him quickly.

"What were your wages, may I ask, Miss Marsh?"

"Thirty pounds a year."

"Really?" in a tone of excessive surprise. "Many ladies are glad to go as companion without any salary, just for the sake of a home and congenial society. I daresay you've been able to save a good deal in all these years."

"I had to dress myself decently, Mrs. Wickham," said Nora frigidly.

Mrs. Wickham was graciousness itself. "Well, I'm sure my husband will be very glad to give you a year's salary, won't you, Jim?" [Pg 49]

"It's very kind of you," replied Nora coldly, "but I'm not inclined to accept anything but what is legally due to me."

"You must remember," went on Mrs. Wickham, "that there'll be very heavy death duties to pay. They'll swallow up the income from Miss Wickham's estate for at least two years, won't they, Mr. Wynne?"

"I quite understand," said Nora.

"Perhaps you'll change your mind."

"I don't think so."

There was an awkward pause. Mr. Wynne rose from his seat at the table. His manner showed unmistakably that he was not impressed by Mrs. Wickham's great generosity.

"Well, I think I must leave you," he said, looking at Nora. "Good-by, Miss Marsh. If I can be of any help to you I hope you'll let me know."

"That's very kind of you."

Bowing slightly to Mrs. Wickham and nodding to her husband, he went out.

"We must go, too, Dorothy," said James uneasily.

Mrs. Wickham began drawing on her gloves. "Jim will be writing to you in a day or two. You know how grateful we both are for all you did for our poor aunt. We shall be glad to give you the very highest references. You're such a wonderful nurse. I'm sure you'll have no difficulty in getting another situation; I expect I can find you something myself. I'll ask among all my friends." [Pg 50]

Nora made no reply to this affable speech.

"Come on, Dorothy; we really haven't any time to lose," said Wickham hurriedly.

"Good-by, Miss Marsh."

"Good-by," said Nora dully. She stood, her hands resting on the table, her eyes fastened on the long blue envelope which Mr. Wynne had forgotten. From a long way off she heard the wheels of the cab on the driveway. [Pg 51]

CHAPTER IV

"I thought they were never going. Well?"

It was Miss Pringle who had come in from her retreat in the garden, eager to hear the news the moment she had seen the Wickhams driving away. Nora turned and looked at her without a word.

Miss Pringle was genuinely startled at the drawn look on her face.

"Nora! What's the matter? Isn't it as much as you thought?"

"Miss Wickham has left me nothing," said Nora in a dead voice.

Miss Pringle gave a positive wail of anguish. "Oh-h-h-h."

"Not a penny. Oh, it's cruel!" the girl said, almost wildly. "After all," she went on bitterly, "there was no need for her to leave me anything. She gave me board and lodging and thirty pounds a year. If I stayed it was because I chose. But she needn't have promised me anything. She needn't have prevented me from marrying."

"My dear, you could never have married that little assistant. He wasn't a gentleman," Miss Pringle reminded her. [Pg 52]

"Ten years! The ten best years of a woman's life, when other girls are enjoying themselves. And what did I get for it? Board and lodging and thirty pounds a year. A cook does better than that."

"We can't expect to make as much money as a good cook," said Miss Pringle, with touching and unconscious pathos. "One has to pay something for living like a lady among people of one's own class."

"Oh, it's cruel!" Nora could only repeat.

"My dear," said Miss Pringle with an effort at consolation, "don't give way. I'm sure you'll have no difficulty in finding another situation. You wash lace beautifully and no one can arrange flowers like you."

Nora sank wearily into a chair. "And I was dreaming of France and Italy—I shall spend ten years

more with an old lady, and then she'll die and I shall look out for another situation. It won't be so easy then because I shan't be so young. And so it'll go on until I can't find a situation because I'm too old, and then some charitable people will get me into a home. You like the life, don't you?"

"My dear, there are so few things a gentlewoman can do."

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"When I think of those ten years," said Nora, pacing up and down the length of the room, "having to put up with every unreasonableness! Never being allowed to feel ill or tired. No servant would have stood what I have. The humiliation I've endured!"

"You're tired and out of sorts," said Miss Pringle soothingly. "Everyone isn't so trying as Miss Wickham. I'm sure Mrs. Hubbard has been kindness itself to me."

"Considering."

"I don't know what you mean by 'considering.'"

"Considering that she's rich and you're poor. She gives you her old clothes. She frequently doesn't ask you to have dinner by yourself when she's giving a party. She doesn't remind you that you're a dependent unless she's very much put out. But you—you've had thirty years of it. You've eaten the bitter bread of slavery till—till it tastes like plum cake!"

Miss Pringle was distinctly hurt. "I don't know why you say such things to me, Nora."

"Oh, you mustn't mind what I say; I——"

"Mr. Hornby would like to see you for a minute, Miss," said Kate from the doorway.

"Now?"

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"I told him I didn't think it would be very convenient, Miss, but he says it's very important, and he won't detain you more than five minutes."

"What a nuisance. Ask him to come in."

"Very good, Miss."

"I wonder what on earth he can want."

"Who is he, Nora?"

"Oh, he's the son of Colonel Hornby. Don't you know, he lives at the top of Molyneux Park? His mother was a great friend of Miss Wickham's. He comes down here now and then for week-ends. He's got something to do with motor cars."

"Mr. Hornby," said Kate from the door.

Reginald Hornby was evidently one of those candid souls who are above simulating an emotion they do not feel. He had regarded the late Miss Wickham as an unusually tiresome old woman. His mother had liked her of course. But he could hardly have been expected to do so. Moreover, he had a shrewd notion that she must have been a perfect Tartar to live with. Miss Marsh might be busy or tired out with the ordeal of the day, but as she also might be leaving almost immediately and he wanted to see her, he had not hesitated to come, once he was sure that the Wickham relatives had departed. That he would find the late Miss Wickham's companion indulging in any show of grief for her late employer, had never entered his head.

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He was a good-looking, if rather vacuous, young man with a long, elegant body. His dark, sleek hair was always carefully brushed and his small mustache trimmed and curled. His beautiful clothes suggested the fashionable tailors of Savile Row. Everything about him—his tie, his handkerchief protruding from his breast pocket, his boots—bore the stamp of the very latest thing.

"I say, I'm awfully sorry to blow in like this," he said airily.

He beamed on Nora, whom he had always regarded as much too pretty a girl to be what he secretly called a 'frozy companion' and sent a quick inquiring glance at Miss Pringle, whom he vaguely remembered to have seen somewhere in Tunbridge Wells. But then Tunbridge Wells was filled with frumps. Oh, yes. He remembered now. She was usually to be seen leading a pair of Poms on a leash.

"You see, I didn't know if you'd be staying on here," he went on, retaining Nora's hand, "and I wanted to catch you. I'm off in a day or two myself."

"Won't you sit down? Mr. Hornby—Miss Pringle."

"How d'you do?"

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Mr. Hornby's glance skimmed lightly over Miss Pringle's surface and returned at once to Nora's more pleasing face.

"Everything go off O. K.?" he inquired genially.

"I beg your pardon?"

"Funeral, I mean. Mother went. Regular outing for her."

Miss Pringle stiffened visibly in her chair and began to study the pattern in the rug at her feet with an absorbed interest. Nora was conscious of a wild desire to laugh, but with a heroic effort succeeded in keeping her face straight out of deference to her elderly friend.

"Really?" she said, in a faint voice.

"Oh, yes," went on young Hornby with unabated cheerfulness. "You see, mother's getting on. I'm the child of her old age—Benjamin, don't you know. Benjamin and Sarah, you know," he explained, apparently for the benefit of Miss Pringle, as he pointedly turned to address this final remark to her.

"I understand perfectly," said Miss Pringle icily, "but it wasn't Sarah."

"Wasn't it? When one of her old friends dies," he went on to Nora, "mother always goes to the funeral and says to herself: 'Well, I've seen *her* out, anyhow!' Then she comes back and eats muffins for tea. She always eats muffins after she's been to a funeral."

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"The maid said you wanted to see me about something in particular," Nora gently reminded him.

"That's right, I was forgetting."

He wheeled suddenly once more on Miss Pringle, who had arrived at that stage in her study of the rug when she was carefully tracing out the pattern with the point of her umbrella.

"If Sarah wasn't Benjamin's mother, whose mother was she?"

"If you want to know, I recommend you to read your Bible," retorted that lady with something approaching heat.

Mr. Hornby slapped his knee. "I thought it was a stumper," he remarked with evident satisfaction.

"The fact is, I'm going to Canada and mother told me you had a brother or something out there."

"A brother, not a something," said Nora, with a smile.

"And she said, perhaps you wouldn't mind giving me a letter to him."

"I will with pleasure. But I'm afraid he won't be much use to you. He's a farmer and he lives miles away from anywhere."

"But I'm going in for farming."

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"You are? What on earth for?"

"I've jolly well got to do something," said Hornby with momentary gloom, "and I think farming's about the best thing I can do. One gets a lot of shooting and riding yon know. And then there are tennis parties and dances. And you make a pot of money, there's no doubt about that."

"But I thought you were in some motor business in London."

"Well, I was, in a way. But—I thought you'd have heard about it. Mother's been telling everybody. Governor won't speak to me. Altogether, things are rotten. I want to get out of this beastly country as quick as I can."

"Would you like me to give you the letter at once?" said Nora, going over to an escritoire that stood near the window.

"I wish you would. Fact is," he went on, addressing no one in particular, as Nora was already deep in her letter and Miss Pringle, having exhausted the possibilities of the rug, was gazing stonily into space, "I'm broke. I was all right as long as I stuck to bridge; I used to make money on that. Over a thousand a year."

"What!"

Horror was stronger than Miss Pringle's resolution to take no further part in the conversation with this extraordinary and apparently unprincipled young man.

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"Playing regularly, you know. If I hadn't been a fool I'd have stuck to that, but I got bitten with chemi."

"With what?" asked Nora, over her shoulder.

"Chemin de fer. Never heard of it? I got in the habit of going to Thornton's. I suppose you never heard of him either. He keeps a gambling hell. Gives you a slap-up supper for nothing, as much pop as you can drink, and cashes your checks like a bird. The result is, I've lost every bob I had and then Thornton sued me on a check I'd given him. The governor forked out, but he says I've got to go to Canada. I'm never going to gamble again, I can tell you that."

"Oh, well, that's something," murmured Nora cheerfully.

"You can't make money at chemi," went on Hornby, relapsing once more into gloom; "the *cagnotte's* bound to clear you out in the end. When I come back I'm going to stick to bridge. There are always plenty of mugs about, and if you have a good head for cards, you can't help making an income out of it."

"But I thought you said you were never going——" began Miss Pringle, but, thinking better of it, abandoned her sentence in mid-air.

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"Here is your letter," said Nora, holding it out to him.

"Thanks, awfully. I daresay I shan't want it, you know. I expect I shall get offered a job the moment I land, but there's no harm having it. I'll be getting along."

"Good-by, then, and good luck."

"Good-by," he said, shaking hands with Nora and Miss Pringle.

"Nora, why don't you go out to Canada?" said Miss Pringle thoughtfully, as soon as the door had closed after young Hornby. "Now your brother has a farm of his own, I should think——"

"My brother's married," interrupted Nora quickly. "He married four years ago."

"You never told me."

"I couldn't."

"Why? Isn't his wife—isn't his wife nice?"

"She was a waitress at a scrubby little hotel in Winnipeg."

"What *are* you going to do then?"

"I? I'm going to look out for another situation."

Miss Pringle shook her head sadly.

"Well, I must be going. Mrs. Hubbard will be back from her drive by this time. She's sure to have you in for tea or something before you go. She's always been quite fond of you. At any rate, I'll see you again, of course."

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"Oh, yes, indeed."

Nora was thankful to be alone once more. She wanted to think it all out. What a day it had been. Starting with such high hopes to end only in utter disaster. She felt completely exhausted by the emotions she had undergone. Time enough to plan to-morrow. To-night she needed rest.

Two days later, in the late afternoon, she found herself in the train for London, the second journey she had taken in ten years. Once, three years before, Miss Wickham had been persuaded to go up and pay the James Wickhams a short visit and had taken Nora with her.

It could hardly have been described as a pleasure trip. Miss Wickham detested visiting and had only yielded to her nephew's importunities because she had never been in his London house to stay any time and had an avid curiosity to see how they lived. She had of course disapproved of everything she saw about the establishment. But, as it was no part of her purpose to let the fact be known to her relatives, she had in a large measure vented her consequent ill-humor upon her unfortunate companion.

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The last few days had seemed full, indeed. No matter how little one may really care for a place, the process of uprooting after ten years is not an easy one. Mr. Wynne had been to see her to renew his offer of assistance and counsel in any plan she might have for the future and she had spent an hour with the good doctor and his wife. The dreaded invitation from Mrs. Hubbard had duly arrived and had turned out to be for dinner, an extraordinary honor. Nora had accepted it entirely on Miss Pringle's account. Mrs. Hubbard had been condescension itself and had even gone the length of excusing Miss Pringle from the evening's game of bezique, in order that she might have a farewell chat with her friend.

She had mildly deprecated Miss Wickham's carelessness in not altering her will, but had reminded Miss Marsh that she should be grateful to her late employer for having had such kindly intentions toward her, vaguely ending her remarks with the statement that as her dear husband had always said in this imperfect world one had often to consider intentions.

It was from her more humble friends that Nora found it hardest to part. She had had tea with the gardener's wife and children of whom she was genuinely fond. But it was the parting from Kate that had brought the tears to her eyes. She had confided to that motherly soul how large she had loomed in the rosy plans she had made while she still had expectations from Miss Wickham, and been assured in turn that Kate couldn't have fancied herself happier than she would have been in looking after her, and the faithful Kate refused to regard the plan as anything more than postponed. It developed that she was an adept in telling fortunes with tea leaves. She hoped her dear Miss Marsh wouldn't consider it a liberty for her to say so, but in every forecast that Kate had made for herself in the last twelfth month, Miss Marsh had always been mixed up, which showed beyond the peradventure of a doubt that they were to meet again.

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It was already dusk when London was reached, but Nora had an address of an inexpensive little private hotel which the doctor's wife had given her. She had written ahead to engage a room so that her mind was at ease on that subject. Not knowing exactly where the street might be, further than that it led off the Strand, she indulged herself in the novel luxury of a taxi and drove to her new lodgings in state.

The chauffeur touched his cap. His "Yes, Miss," was non-committal.

She was conscious of an unusual feeling of exaltation as she went along. London, while it can be one of the most depressing cities in the world when one is alone and friendless, quickens the imagination. As they went through Trafalgar Square and caught a fleeting glimpse of the National Gallery, Nora resolved that she would give herself a real treat and renew old acquaintance with that institution as well as see the Wallace collection and the Tate Gallery, both of which would be new to her. She realized more poignantly than ever how starved her love of beauty had been for the last ten years. It awoke in her afresh with the thought that for a few days, at least, she could permit herself the luxury of gratifying it.

She was shown to her room by a neat maid who said she would see what might be done in the way of a light tea. As a rule breakfast was the only repast that was supposed to be furnished. But she was quite sure Miss Horn, the proprietor, would, in view of the fact that the young lady was a stranger in London and would hardly know where to go alone for a bite of dinner, make an exception.

Nora thanked her and set about making the bare little room, which was quite at the top of the house, look a little more homelike by unpacking some of her own things. After all, she reflected, it wasn't much less cheerful than the room she had had for ten years. Perhaps her late participation in the splendors of Miss Wickham's guest chamber, which had been part of Dr. Evans' prescription, had spoiled her for simpler joys. She laughed aloud at the thought.

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By the time she had had her supper, which was sufficiently good, and written a few notes—one to the doctor's wife to say that she thought she would be quite comfortable in her new quarters, and one to the head of the agency through which she had obtained her post with Miss Wickham—Nora found herself ready for bed.

The next day dawned bright and fine; one of those delightful spring days to which the great city occasionally treats you as if to protest against the injustice of her reputation for being dark and gloomy.

There were a number of pleasant looking people in the coffee room when Nora went down to breakfast, which turned out to be abundant and well cooked. Having inquired her direction—a sense of location was not one of her gifts—she set out gaily enough for a whole day of sightseeing. She might never get another position and have eventually to go out as a charwoman—the detail that she would be illy equipped for any such undertaking she humorously dismissed—but a day or two of unalloyed enjoyment she was going to have, come what might.

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The day was a complete success. Having done several of the picture galleries, lunched and dined frugally at one of the A. B. C. restaurants, Nora returned at nightfall, tired but happy. Oh, the blessed freedom of it!

The next morning on coming down stairs she found at her plate a letter from the agency. The management of affairs, it seemed, had passed into other hands. Doubtless Miss Marsh's name would be found on the books of several years back, but it was not familiar to the new director. However, they would, of course, be pleased to put themselves at Miss Marsh's service. If she would be good enough to give them an early call, bringing any and all references she might have, etc., etc.

Miss Marsh tore the note into tiny fragments. The agency could wait, everything could wait, for the moment. She must have her fling, the first taste of freedom in all these years. After that—!

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CHAPTER V

October had come. Nora was no longer in the comfortable little hotel to which the doctor's wife had sent her. Early in July she had thought it wiser to seek cheaper quarters where breakfast was not 'included.' Every penny must be counted now, and by combining breakfast and lunch late in the morning she found she could do quite well until night, besides saving an appreciable sum for the end of the week, when her room must be paid for.

The summer had been one long nightmare of heat. It had been years according to all accounts since the unhappy Londoners had so sweltered beneath the scorching rays of an almost tropic sun. Often, when tossing on her little bed or when seated by her small window which gave on a sort of court, with the forlorn hope of finding some air stirring, had she thought with longing of the pleasant garden at Tunbridge Wells and its perfumed breezes.

So far her search for any position had been fruitless. She had gone to other agencies; to some whose greatly reduced fees were a sure indication that she could hope for nothing so "high class," to use their hateful phrase, as she had been accustomed to. But one must do what one could.

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At one establishment, she shuddered to remember, she found that she would be expected to sit in the office, as at the servants' agencies, to be inspected by prospective employers. This, Nora had

flatly refused to do and had been coolly informed by the manager, an insufferable young man with a loud voice and a vulgar manner, that in that case he could do nothing for her.

He had at the same time refused to return her fee, which he had providently collected before explaining these conditions, on the ground that they never returned fees. Nora had been glad enough to make her escape from his hateful presence without arguing the matter with him, although she considered that, to all intents and purposes, her pocket had been picked.

Apparently everyone in the world was already supplied with a companion. She had thought of filing an application for the position of nursery governess, only to find that, for a really good post, two modern languages would be required. That, coupled with the fact that she was obliged to confess to absolutely no previous experience in teaching, closed the door to even second-class appointments.

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And the desolating loneliness of it all! Only once in all this time had she seen anyone she knew, and that was shortly after her arrival while still in the first flush of her newly regained freedom. She had gone with a young woman who was staying at the hotel for a few days to the gallery of a theater. From her lofty perch she had seen Reggie Hornby with a gay party of young men in the stalls below. Evidently he was making the most of his last hours at home before going into exile.

Since leaving the hotel she had exchanged but few words with anyone beyond her landlady, the little slavey and the people at the various agencies. Once, it chanced that for several days in succession she had lunched at the same table in a dingy little restaurant with a fresh, pleasant-looking young girl, who had said 'Good morning' in such a friendly manner on their second encounter that Nora felt encouraged to begin conversation.

Her new acquaintance had the gift of a sympathetic manner and before Nora realized it she found herself relating the story of her failures and disappointments. Miss Hodson—so Nora discovered she was called from the very business-like card she had handed her at the beginning of the repast, with an air which for the moment relapsed from the sympathetic to the professional—had suggested when they had finished their lunch that, as she still had a quarter of an hour to spare, they might go and finish their chat in one of the little green oases abutting on the Embankment. Seated on one of the benches she proceeded to advise her companion to take up stenography and typewriting while she was still in funds.

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"There are plenty of chances for a girl who knows her business and you're your own mistress and not at the beck and call of any old cat, who thinks she has bought you outright just because she's paying you starvation wages," she said with a finely independent air. Then in a thoroughly business-like way she went on to give the address of the school at which she had studied herself and had offered to take Nora there any evening the coming week.

In the end, to Nora's great pleasure, she had suggested joining forces for an outing on the coming Sunday. With a gesture that seemed to refer one to her card, she had explained that after typing all week in a stuffy office she always tried to have a Sunday out of doors to get her mind off her work. It was arranged that they should go somewhere together, leaving their destination to be decided when they met. They were to meet in front of the National Gallery at a quarter before ten. But, although poor Nora waited for over an hour, her friend did not turn up, and she had returned sadly to her dreary room. Neither of the girls had thought to exchange addresses. Beyond her name and occupation Miss Hodson's card vouchsafed nothing.

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Nor had Nora ever seen her again, although she had returned several times to the restaurant where they had met. She had spent many of the long sleepless hours of the night in speculation as to what had become of her. She was sure that some accident had befallen her or she would have met her again. No one could be so cruel intentionally.

Once again in a tea room she had timidly ventured, prompted by sheer loneliness, to speak to an elderly woman with gray hair. It was a harmless little remark about some flowers in a vase on the counter. The woman had stared at her coldly for a moment before she said:

"I do not seem to recall where I have had the pleasure of seeing you before."

A flash of the old temper had crimsoned Nora's cheek, but she made no reply. Since then, aching as she was for a little human companionship, she had spoken to no one.

She had had two long letters from Miss Pringle, whose star seemed momentarily to be in the ascendant. Mrs. Hubbard had been ordered to the seaside; they were later to take a continental trip. There was even talk of consulting a famous and expensive specialist before returning to the calm of Tunbridge Wells. But prosperity had not made Miss Pringle selfish. In the face of the gift of a costume, which Mrs. Hubbard had actually never worn, having conceived a strong distaste for it on its arrival from the dressmaker, she had time to think of her less fortunate friend.

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While waiting for the situation which was sure to come eventually, why didn't Nora run down to Brighton for a week after the terrible London heat? One could get really very comfortable lodgings remarkably cheap at this season. It would do her no end of good and, on the theory that a watched pot never boils, she would be certain to find that there was something for her on her return.

Miss Pringle's brother, it seemed, had had a turn of luck. Just what, she discreetly forbore to mention. Certainly, it could not have been at cards. Nora smiled at the recollection of the horror that Mr. Hornby's remarks as to his earnings from that source had provoked. However, he had

most generously sent his sister a ten-pound note as a present. Miss Pringle had, of course, no possible use for it at the time. Also it appeared that the thought of carrying it about with her, particularly as she was going among foreigners, filled her with positive terror. Therefore, she was enclosing it to Nora to take care of. She hoped she would use any part of it or all of it. She could return it after they returned to Tunbridge Wells, provided that Miss Pringle survived the natural perils that beset one who ventured out of England. They would have started on their journey before the receipt of the letter. As to their destination, Miss Pringle said never a word.

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A small envelope had fallen into her lap when she opened the letter. With dimmed eyes Nora opened it. It contained the ten-pound note.

It was a week later that it occurred to Nora to answer two advertisements that appeared in one of the morning papers. In each case it was a companion that was wanted. One of the ladies lived at Whitby and pending the answer to her letter she decided to call personally on the other, who lived at Hampstead.

The morning being fine, she decided to make an early start and walk about on Hampstead Heath until a suitable hour for making her call. When she finally arrived before the house, a rather pretentious looking structure in South Hampstead, she was met at the gate by a middle-aged woman of unprepossessing appearance, who inquired rather sharply as to her errand.

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"Mrs. Blake's card distinctly said that all applications were to be made in writing," she said disagreeably, in reply to Nora's explanation.

"The one I read did not, at least I don't think it did," said Nora.

"Well, if it didn't, it should have," said the woman tartly.

"May I ask if *you* are Mrs. Blake?"

"Write and you may find out; although I might as well tell you, you won't answer. Mrs. Blake will be wanting someone of a very different appearance," said the woman rudely.

"I am indeed unfortunate," said Nora with a bow.

The woman closed the gate with a bang and turned toward the house as Nora walked rapidly away. She decided to answer no more advertisements.

One morning, at the end of the week, the post brought her three letters. One from its postmark was clearly from her brother in Canada. She put that aside for the moment to be read at her leisure.



NORA OVERHEARS FRANK SAY WIVES ARE MADE FOR WORK ONLY

The Yorkshire lady, it appeared, was blind and required a companion to read to her and to assist in preparing some memoirs which her dead brother had left uncompleted. She offered Nora a refined home with every comfort that a lady could desire, but—there was no salary attached to the position. The third was from one of the agencies. A client was prepared to offer a lady companion the magnificent sum of ten shillings a week and her lunch. Out of her salary Nora would be expected, therefore, to find herself a room, clothes, breakfast and supper!

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Her brother's letter was, as always, kind and affectionate. He rather vaguely apologized for his delay in replying to hers, written at the time of Miss Wickham's death. He had been frightfully busy, up at dawn and so tired at night that he was glad to tumble into bed right after supper. His wife, too, had had a sharp spell of sickness. However, she was all right again, he was glad to say. Why did not Nora come out to them? They would be glad to offer her a comfortable home, although she must make up her mind to dispense with the luxuries she was accustomed to. But

there was always plenty to eat and a good bed, at any rate. He knew she would grow to love the life as he had done. There was a fine freedom about it. For his part, nothing would ever tempt him back to England, except for a visit when he had put by a little more. She would find his wife a good sort. She, too, would welcome her sister-in-law. They would be no end of company for each other during the long days while the men were away. And she would be glad to have someone to lend a hand about the house.

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He hoped she had been able to save enough money to pay her passage out. If she hadn't, he would somehow manage to send whatever was necessary. But while he was fairly prosperous, ready money was a little more scarce than usual, for the moment. His wife's illness had been pretty expensive, what with hiring a woman to do all the work, etc., etc.

The letter settled it. On the one hand was this heart-breaking waiting while watching one's little hoard diminish from day to day and always the terrifying and unanswerable question: What is to be done when it is exhausted? On the other, a home and the prospect that she might be able in a measure to pay her way by helping her brother's wife. Nora's housewifely accomplishments were but few, yet she could learn, and while learning she could at least take away the sting of those lonely hours, as her brother had said. On one thing she was resolved: she would let bygones be bygones. She would do everything in her power to win her sister-in-law, forgetting everything but that she was the wife of her only brother.

The next few days were the happiest she had known for a long time. There was a pleasurable excitement in getting ready for so momentous a step. After having paid her passage she found that she had eight pounds in the world, the result of ten years' work as lady's companion. She wrote to let Mr. Wynne know of her decision and enclosed Miss Pringle's banknote to the doctor's wife with an explanatory note asking her to see that it reached her hands safely. Miss Pringle herself should have a long letter from the New World waiting her on her return.

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Her last day at home, having satisfied herself that nothing was forgotten, she spent a long hour in the Turner room in the Tate Gallery, drinking it all in for the last time. When she left the building it was with a feeling that the last farewell to the old life was said.

To her great pleasure and a little to her surprise, Nora discovered herself to be a thoroughly good sailor. As a consequence, the voyage to Montreal was quite the most delightful thing she had ever experienced. The boat was a slow one but the time never once seemed long. Indeed, as they approached their destination, she found herself wishing that the Western Continent might, by some convulsion of nature, be removed, quite safely, an indefinite number of leagues farther, or that they might make a détour by way of the antipodes, anything rather than bring the voyage to an end.

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There were but few passengers at this season so that beyond the daily exchange of ordinary courtesies, she was able to pass much of the time by herself. The weather was unusually fine for the time of year. It was possible to spend almost all the daylight hours on deck, and with night came long hours of dreamless sleep such as she never remembered to have enjoyed since childhood. As a consequence, it was a thoroughly rejuvenated Nora that landed in Montreal. The stress and strain of the past summer was forgotten or only to be looked back upon as a sort of horrid nightmare from which she had happily awakened.

It was too late in the day after they had landed to think of continuing her journey. Besides, as is often the case with people who have stood a sea voyage without experiencing any disagreeable sensations, Nora found that she still felt the motion of the boat after landing.

It seemed a pity, too, not to see something of this new-world city while she was on the ground. Her brother's farm was still an incredible distance farther west. People thought nothing of distance in this amazing New World. Still, it might easily be long before she would be here again. The future was a blank page. There was a delightful irresponsibility about the thought. She had come over the sea at her brother's bidding. The future was his care, not hers.

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The journey west had the same charm of novelty that the sea voyage had had. The nearest station to Eddie's farm was a place called Dyer in the Province of Manitoba, not far from Winnipeg. Once inured to the new and strange mode of traveling in Canada, so different from what she had been accustomed to, Nora prepared to enjoy it. Never before had she realized the possibilities of beauty in a winter landscape. The flying prospect without the window fascinated her. The magazines and papers with which she had provided herself lay unopened in her lap. She realized that these vast snow-covered stretches might easily drive one mad with their loneliness and desolation if one had to live among them. But to rush through them as they were doing was exhilarating. It was all so strange, so contrary to any previous experience, that Nora had an uncanny feeling that they might easily have left the earth she knew and be flying through space. She whimsically thought that if at the next stop she were to be told that she was on the planet Mars, she would not be greatly astonished. It was like traveling with Alice in Wonderland.

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One thing, however, recalled her to earth and prosaic mundane affairs: her supply of money was rapidly getting dangerously low. Barring accident, she would have enough to get her to Dyer, where Eddie was to meet her. But suppose they should be snowed up for a day or two? Only an hour before she had been thrilled with an account of just such an experience which a man in the seat in front of her was recounting to his companion. Well, if that happened, she would either have to go hungry or beg food from the more affluent of her fellow-passengers! Fortunately she was not obliged to put their generosity to the test. The train arrived at Dyer without accident only

a few minutes behind the scheduled time.

There were a number of people at the station as Nora alighted. For a moment she had a horrid fear that either she had been put off at the wrong place or that her brother had failed to meet her. Certainly none of the fur-coated figures were in the least familiar. But almost at once one of the men detached himself from the waiting group on the platform and after one hesitating second came toward her.

"Nora, my child, I hardly knew you! I was forgetting that you would be a grown woman," and Nora was half smothered in a furry embrace and kissed on both cheeks before she was quite sure that the advancing stranger was her brother. [Pg 81]

"Oh, Eddie, dear, I didn't know you at all. But how can one be expected to with that great cap covering the upper part of your face and a coat collar hiding nearly all the rest. But you really haven't changed, now that I get a look at you. I daresay I have altered more than you. But I was little more than a child when you went away."

"Well, we have quite a little drive ahead of us," said Eddie as, having himself helped to carry Nora's trunks to a nondescript-looking vehicle to which were attached two horses, he motioned to Nora to get in. "I expect you won't be sorry to have a little air after being so long in a stuffy car."

Nora noticed that he gave the man who had helped him with the trunks no tip and that they called each other "Joe" and "Ed." This was democracy with a vengeance. She made a little face of disapproval.

Nora never forgot that drive. In the light of after-events it seemed to have cut her off more sharply from all the old life than either the crossing of the pathless sea or the long overland journey. It was taken for the most part in silence, Eddie's attention being largely taken up with his team. Also Nora noted that he seemed to feel the cold more than she did, as he kept his coat collar turned up all the way. She herself was so occupied with her thoughts that she had no sense of either time or distance. [Pg 82]

At last they came in sight of a house such as she had never seen. It was built entirely of logs. At the sound of their approach, the one visible door opened on the crack as if to avoid letting in the cold, and Nora saw a thin dark little woman with rather a hard look and a curiously dried-up skin, whom she rightly guessed to be her sister-in-law, standing in the doorway, while lounging nonchalantly against the doorpost was a tall, strong, well-set-up young man whose age might have been anything between thirty and thirty-five. He had remarkably clean-cut features and was clean-shaven. His frankly humorous gaze rested unabashed on the stranger's face.

Forgetting all her good resolutions to adapt herself to the habits and customs of this new country, Nora felt that she could have struck him in his impudent face. The fact that she reddened under his scrutiny, naturally only made her the more furious.

"Come on out here, some of you," called Eddie jovially. "Heavens! The way you all hug the stove would make anyone believe you'd never seen a Canadian winter before in your lives. Here, Frank, lend a hand with these trunks and call Ben to take the horses. Gertie, this is Nora. Now you need never be lonely again." [Pg 83]

"Pleased to make your acquaintance," said Gertie primly.

The man called Frank, the one who had been honoring Nora with his regard, came forward with a hand outstretched to help her alight, while another man, the ordinary type of English laborer placed himself at the horses' heads.

"Come, hop out, Nora."

There was nothing else to do, Nora put the very tips of her fingers into the outstretched hand. To her unspeakable indignation, she felt herself lifted bodily out and actually carried inside the door. At her smothered exclamation, Gertie gave a shrill laugh. [Pg 84]

CHAPTER VI

Three weeks had passed with inconceivable rapidity, leaving Nora with the dazed feeling that one has sometimes when waking from a fantastic dream.

There were moments when she was overwhelmed with the utter hopelessness of ever being able to adapt herself to a mode of life so foreign to all her traditions. She had, she told herself, been prepared to find everything different from life at home; and, while she had smiled—on that day such ages ago when young Hornby had called on her at Tunbridge Wells to announce his impending departure from the land of his birth—at his airy theory that the life of the Canadian farmer was largely occupied with riding, hunting, dancing and tennis, she found to her dismay that her own mental picture of her brother's existence had been nearly as far from the reality.

On the drive over from the station, Eddie had vaguely remarked that he had a great surprise for her when she reached the house. Nora had paid but little attention at the moment, thinking that he probably meant the house itself. What had been her astonishment—when once her rage at [Pg 85]

being lifted bodily from the sled by the man called Frank had permitted of her feeling any other emotion—to find Reginald Hornby himself an inmate of her brother's household. There was but little trace of the ultra smart young Londoner, beyond his still carefully kept hair and mustache. The only difference between his costume and that of the others was that his overalls were newer and that his flannel shirt was plainly a Piccadilly product.

Nora had known gentlemen farmers in England who worked hard, riding about their estates every day supervising and directing everything, and who seemed, from their conversation, to take it all seriously enough. She had made all allowance for the rougher life in a new and unsettled country. There was something picturesque and romantic about the frontiersman which had always appealed to her imagination. She had read a little of him and had seen a play in London the night she recognized Reggie from afar, where the scene was laid in the Far West. On returning to the hotel she had looked with new interest at Eddie's photograph and tried to picture him in the costume worn by the leading man.

But to find that her own brother, a man of education and refinement, actually worked with his own hands like a common laborer and—what to Nora's mind was infinitely more incomprehensible—on a footing of perfect equality with his hired men, calling them familiarly by their given names and being called "Ed" in turn, was a distinctly disagreeable revelation. That they should be familiar with Gertie was quite another matter. Probably they were acquaintances of long standing dating back to her old hotel days.

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Her sister-in-law, too, was absolutely different from the type she had imagined. Always she had seen her as one of those vapid, pretty little creatures who had become old long before her time; peevish, spoiled, inclined to be flirtatious, refusing to give up her youth, still living in the recollection of her little day of triumph.

Gertie fulfilled only one of these conditions. She was a small woman, not nearly so tall as Nora herself. In all else she was as different as possible from what she had imagined. There could never have been anything of the 'clinging vine' about Gertie. As a girl she might have been handsome in an almost masculine way; pretty, in the generally accepted sense, she could never have been.

Her one coquetry seemed to be in the matter of shoes. Her feet were unbelievably small. Nora divined that she was inordinately proud of them. While always scrupulously neat, she was apparently indifferent to clothes so long as they were clean and not absolutely shabby. But her high-heeled shoes were the smartest that could be had from Winnipeg.

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And as for her being soft and spoiled! Never was there a more tireless and hard-working creature. From early morning till late at night she was never idle. She was a perfect human dynamo of force and energy. The cooking and washing for the 'family' which, now that Nora was here, consisted of six persons, four of whom were men with the appetites which naturally come with a long day's work in the open air, in itself was no light task. But, by way of recreation, after the supper dishes had been washed up, Gertie darned socks, mended shirts, patched trousers for the men folk or sewed on some garment for herself. Nora longed to see her sit with folded hands just once.

That she was as devoted to her husband as he to her there could be no doubt. All other men were a matter of complete indifference to her. Were they good workers or shirkers? That was the only thing about them of any interest. But she was not the sort of woman to show tenderness or affection.

Eddie had apparently the greatest respect for her judgment in all matters pertaining to the running of the farm. Frequently in the evenings they sat together in the far corner of the living room, Eddie talking in a low voice, while Gertie, always at her eternal sewing, listened with close attention, often nodding her head in approval, but occasionally shaking it vehemently when any project failed to meet with her approbation. Occasionally her sharp bird-like glance flashed over the other occupants of the room: at the three men yarning lazily by the big stove or playing cards at the dining table and at Nora making a pretense of reading a six-months-old magazine, or writing, her portfolio on her knee. Always, when Nora encountered that glance, she understood its exultant message.

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"Look, you," it said as plainly as if it had been couched in actual words, "look at me ruling over my little court, advising, as a queen might, with her prime minister. You think yourself my superior, you with your fine-lady's airs and graces! A pretty pass your education and accomplishments have brought you to. Of what use are you to anyone?"

There was no blinking the fact: the antagonism between the two women was too instinctive, too deep ever to be more than superficially covered over. They each recognized it. And yet neither was wholly to blame. It had its roots in conditions that were far more significant than mere personal feeling.

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Nora, for her part, had come to her brother's house with the sincere intention of doing everything in her power to win her sister-in-law's good will if not affection. She had believed that their common fondness for Eddie would be a sure foundation on which to build. But from the first, without being at all conscious of it, her manner breathed patronage and disapproval of a mode of life so foreign to all her experience. She had made the resolution to remember nothing of Gertie's humble origin, to treat her in every way with the deference due her brother's wife.

Gertie, too, had made good resolutions. She was at heart the more generous nature of the two. She was prepared to find her husband's sister unskilled to the point of incompetency in all the housewifely lore of which she was past mistress; for she, too, had her traditions. She would have laughed at the idea that it was possible for her to be jealous of anybody. But secretly she knew that there was one thing which aroused in her a frenzy of jealous rage; that was those years of her husband's life in which she had neither part nor lot. Any reference to his old life 'at home' fairly maddened her.

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And deep down in her heart, each woman nursed a grievance. With Gertie it was the remembrance of the angry letter of protest which Nora had written her brother when she learned of his approaching marriage and which he had been indiscreet enough to show her; with Nora, it was the recollection of Gertie's laugh the night of her arrival when her brother's hired servant had dared to take her for a moment in his arms.

Still, any open rupture might have been avoided or at least delayed for several months longer, if either could have been persuaded to exercise a little more patience and self-control. Each of them, in her different way, had known adversity. Both of them had had to learn to control tempers naturally high while they were still dependent. But it never occurred to either of them that the obligation to do so still existed.

From Gertie's point of view, Nora was just as much a dependent as in the days when she was a hired companion to a rich woman. It was her house in law and in fact, for her husband had made it over to her. It was her bread that she ate, her bed she slept in. It behooved her, therefore, to be a little less lofty and condescending. She had always known how it would be, and it was only because the project seemed so near her husband's heart that she had consented to such an experiment.

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In simple justice it must be said that such a thought had never entered Nora's head. She had accepted gladly her brother's invitation to make her home with him. What more natural that he should offer it, now that he was able to do so? In return she was perfectly willing to do everything she could to help in all the woman's work about the house as far as her ignorance would permit. It could hardly be expected that she would be as proficient in household work as a person who had done it all her life. She was more than willing to concede her sister-in-law's superiority in all such matters. And she was perfectly ready to learn all that Gertie would teach her. She had, in everything, been prepared to meet her half-way; further she would not go. For the rest, it was her brother's place to protect her.

Sadly Nora confessed to herself that Eddie had deteriorated in a degree that she could not have believed possible. The first shock had come when they sat down to supper the night of her arrival. To her amazed disgust, they had all eaten at the same table, hired men and all. And then, to see her brother, a gentleman by birth, breeding, and training, sitting down at his own table in his shirt-sleeves!

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Her own seat was on the right of her sister-in-law, next Reginald Hornby. All the men except Eddie wore overalls. He had replaced his with an old black waistcoat and a pair of grubby dark trousers. Nora wondered sarcastically if his more formal costume was in honor of her arrival, but quickly remembered that he had had to drive to Dyer. It was cold outside; probably these festive garments were warmer. She found herself speculating as to whether any of the men owned anything but outer coats.

There hadn't been much general conversation at that first meal. Naturally, Eddie had had many questions to ask about old acquaintances in England. Nora had given her first impressions of travel in the New World, addressing many of her remarks to Gertie, who had been noticeably silent. Through all her bright talk the thought would obtrude itself: "What can Reggie Hornby think of my brother?"

She had an angry consciousness, too, that she was unwittingly furnishing much amusement to that objectionable person opposite, whose name she learned was Frank Taylor. She meant to speak to Eddie about him later. He was an entirely new type to her. His fellow servant, whose name was Trotter, on the contrary, could be seen about London any day, an ordinary, ignorant Cockney. He, at least, had the merit of seeming to know his place and how to conduct himself in the presence of his betters, and except when asking for more syrup, of which he seemed inordinately fond, kept discreetly silent.

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But the idea that there was any difference in their stations was not betrayed in Taylor's look or manner. He commented humorously from time to time on Nora's various experiences coming overland, quite oblivious, to all appearances, that she pointedly ignored him. Nora had arrived at that point in her gay recital when she had had qualms that her brother had failed to meet her.

"You can fancy how I felt getting down at a perfectly strange station——"

She was interrupted by Gertie's irritating little laugh.

"But what have I said? What is it?"

It was Taylor who replied.

"Well, you see out here in the wilderness we don't call it a station, *we* call it a depot."

"Do you really?" asked Nora with exaggerated surprise, looking at her brother.

"Custom of the country," he said smilingly.

"But a depot is a place where stores are kept."

"Of course I don't know what you call it in England," said Gertie aggressively, "but while you're in *this* country, I guess you'd better call it what other folks do." [Pg 94]

"It would be rather absurd for me to call it that when it's wrong," said Nora, flushing with annoyance.

Gertie's thin lips tightened.

"Of course I don't pretend to have had *very* much schooling, but it seems to me I've read something somewhere about doing as the Romans do when you're livin' with them. At any rate, I'm sure of one thing: it's considered the polite thing to do in *any* country."

The feeling that she had been put in the wrong, even if not very tactfully, did not tend to lessen Nora's annoyance. She looked appealingly at her brother, but he, leaning back in his chair and seeing that his wife's eyes were bent on her plate, shook his head at her, smiling slightly.

"If everyone has finished," said Gertie after an awkward pause, "if you'll all move your chairs away I'll clear away the things."

"May I help you?" said Nora with an effort at conciliation.

"No, thanks."

"No, no. You're company to-night," said her brother with a man's relief at finding an unpleasant situation at an end. "But I daresay to-morrow Gertie'll find plenty for you to do. We'll all be out till dinner time. You girls will have a lot to talk over while you're getting acquainted." [Pg 95]

Hornby groaned dismally.

"It doesn't make any difference what the weather is in this blessed country," he said dismally to Nora, "you have to go out whether there's really anything to do or not."

"That's so," laughed Taylor; "still I think you'll admit the Boss always manages to find something to fill up the time."

"That he does," said Hornby with another hollow groan.

"The last time I saw you," said Nora, "you were calling poor old England all sorts of dreadful names. Isn't farming in Canada all your fancy painted it?"

Gertie paused in the act of pouring water from the kettle into the dishpan. "Not a bit like it," she said dryly. "He's like most of the English I've run up against. They think all you've got to do is just to sit down and have afternoon tea and watch the crops grow by themselves."

"Oh, come now, Gertie. You've never had to accuse me of loafing, and I'm an Englishman," said her husband good-naturedly.

"I said 'most.'"

"And as for afternoon tea," broke in Hornby, "I don't believe they have that sacred institution in the whole blessed country." [Pg 96]

"You have tea with all your meals. Men out here have something else to do but sit indoors afternoons and eat between meals."

"Do you know," said Nora after a pause, "it isn't nearly so cold as I expected to find it. Don't you usually have it much colder than this?"

"It's rarely colder until later in the season. But Frank, here, who's our champion weather prophet, says it's going to be an exceptional season with hardly any snow at all."

Nora had been conscious all through the evening that Taylor had hardly once taken his eyes from her face. She looked directly at him for the first time, to find him watching her with a look of quiet amusement.

"That would indeed be an exceptional season, if all one hears of the rigors of the climate be true," she said coldly.

"Every season in this country is exceptional," he said humorously; "if it isn't exceptional one way, it's sure to be exceptional the other."

"Fetch me those pants of yours," said Gertie to Trotter.

He left the room, to return shortly with the desired articles, exhibiting a yawning tear in one of the knees. Gertie at once set about mending them in the same workmanlike manner that she did everything. [Pg 97]

"Doesn't she ever rest?" asked Nora in an undertone of Hornby.

"Never," he whispered. "Her one recreation is abusing me. I fancy you'll come in for a little of the same medicine. She's planning an amusing winter, I can see that already."

"I think, if I may, I'll ask you to excuse me," said Nora, rising abruptly. "I'm a little tired after my long journey. Oh, how good it'll be to find oneself in a real bed again."

"I'm sure you must be," said her brother. "Nora knows where her room is?" he said, turning to his wife.

"She was up before supper; she can't very well have forgotten the way. The house is small after what she's been accustomed to, I dare say."

"Thank you, I can find it again easily," said Nora hastily. "I'll see you at breakfast, Eddie?" She crossed over to where Gertie was sewing busily. "Good night—Gertie. I hope you will not find me too stupid about learning things. You'll find me willing, anyway," she said almost humbly.

Gertie looked up at her with real kindness.

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"Willing's half the battle," she said in softened tone.

As Nora was leaving the room, satisfied at having done her part as far as Gertie was concerned, she was recalled by Taylor's drawling tone.

"Oh, Miss Nora, you're forgetting something."

"Am I? What?"

"You're forgetting to say 'good night' to me."

"Why, so I am!"

She could hear them laugh as she left the room. And so ended the first day in her brother's house.

Breakfast the next morning was of the most hurried description. Gertie herself did not sit down until the men had gone, being chiefly occupied with baking some sort of hot cakes which were new to Nora, who confined herself to an egg and some tea. She secretly longed for some toast; but as no one else seemed to have any, she refrained from making her wants known. Perhaps later, when she was more familiar with the ways of this strange household, she would be permitted to make some for herself when she wanted it.

While her sister-in-law was eating her breakfast, Nora stood looking out of the window at the vast expanse of snow-covered country with never a house in sight. Already there were signs that Taylor's prophecy would be fulfilled. The sun, which had been up only a few hours, shone brightly, and already the air had lost much of its sharpness. It was distinctly warmer than it had been the day before.

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At the first sign that Gertie had finished her breakfast, Nora began to gather the things together for washing, wisely not waiting to ask permission. If possible, Gertie seemed to be less inclined for conversation in the early morning than at night. They finished the task in unbroken silence. When the last dish had been put away, Gertie spoke:

"Can you bake?"

"I have baked cakes."

"How about bread and biscuits?"

"I've never tried them."

"Umph!"

"I should be glad to learn, if you would be good enough to teach me."

"I have little time for teaching," said Gertie ungraciously. "But you can watch how I do it and maybe you'll learn something."

"Can you wash and iron?" said Gertie while she was kneading her dough.

"Of course I can iron and I can wash lace."

"People round here wear more flannel shirts than lace. I suppose you never washed any flannels?"

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"No, never."

"Have you ever done any scrubbing?"

"Of course not." Nora was beginning to find this catechism a little trying.

"Not work for a lady, I suppose. Just what does a companion do?"

"It depends. She does whatever her employer requires; reads aloud, acts as secretary, goes riding and shopping with the lady she lives with, arranges the flowers, everything of that sort."

"Oh. But nothing really useful."

Nora gave an angry laugh. "It's clear that some people consider a companion's work useful, since they employ them."

"You take pay for it; after all, it's much the same as being a servant."

"It's not at all the same."

"Ed tells me that sometimes when Miss Wickers, Wickham—whatever her name was——"

"Miss Wickham."

"That when Miss Wickham had company for dinner, you had to have your dinner alone."

"That is true."

"Then she considered you sort of a servant," said Gertie triumphantly. Nora was silent. Gertie having cut her dough into small round pieces with a tin cutter and put them into her pans, went toward the oven.

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"And yet you object to eating at the same table with the hired men."

Having satisfied herself that the oven was at the proper heat, she shut the door with a bang.

"I've said nothing about it."

"You didn't need to."

"But I most certainly do object to it and I can't for the life of me see the necessity of it."

"I was what you call a servant for years; I suppose you object to eating at the table with me."

"What perfect nonsense! It's not at all the same thing. You're my brother's wife and the mistress of his house."

"Yes, I'm the mistress of the house all right," said Gertie grimly.

"Frank Taylor's an uncommonly handsome man, isn't he?"

"I really haven't noticed."

"What perfect nonsense!" mimicked Gertie. "Of course you've noticed. Any woman would notice him."

"Then I must be different from other women."

"Oh, no, you're not; you only think you are. At bottom women are all alike, take it from me, and I've known a few."

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"If I can be of no help to you here, I think I'll go and unpack my box," said Nora. She felt as if she had borne all she possibly could.

"As you like."

Once in her own room, Nora found it hard to keep back her angry tears. Only the thought that her reddened eyes would betray her to Gertie at dinner kept her from having a good cry.

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CHAPTER VII

That one morning was a fair sample of all the other days. Each suspected the other, neither would make allowances or concessions. As a consequence, day by day the breach widened. Even Eddie, who was more unobserving than most men, felt vaguely uncomfortable in the surcharged atmosphere. From the first Nora realized that it was an unequal contest; Gertie was too strongly entrenched in her position. But it was not in her nature to refrain from administering those little thrusts, which women know so well how to deal one another, from any motive of policy. The question of what she should do once her brother's house became intolerable she never permitted herself to ask.

In the needle-pricking mode of warfare she was, of course, far more expert than her rival. But if Gertie's hand was clumsy it was also heavy. And always in the back of her mind was the consciousness that she, so to speak, had at least one piece of heavy artillery which she could bring up once the enemy's fire became unendurable.

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During the day, the men being out of the house except at meal time, there was to a certain degree, a cessation of hostilities. Nora gradually acquired some knowledge of housework. She learned to cook fairly well and always helped with the washing, rarely complaining of her aching arms and back. The only indication she had that she was making progress was that Gertie complained less. Praise, of course, was not to be expected.

At dinner the men were usually too anxious to get back to work—always with the exception of Hornby, who according to his own highly colored account, had been assigned the herculean task of splitting all the wood required by the Province of Manitoba for the ensuing winter—to linger longer than the time required for smoking a hurried pipe, so that it was only during the long evenings that hostilities were resumed. And then, more or less under cover.

There was one person upon whom Nora could openly vent her nervous irritation after a long day in Gertie's society, and that was Frank Taylor. They quarreled constantly, to the great amusement of the others. But with him, too, she felt hopelessly at a disadvantage. He was maddeningly sure of himself, and while he sometimes gave back thrust for thrust, he never lost his temper. Seemingly, nothing could penetrate his armor of good nature, nor make him comprehend that she really meant her bitter words. Slow of movement and speech, his mind was alert enough, and Nora had to admit to herself, although she always openly denied it, that he had humor. To lose one's own temper in a wordy passage at arms and find one's opponent still smiling and serene is not a soothing experience.

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Often, in the darkness of the night after she had gone to bed, she could feel her cheek burn at the recollection that this 'ignorant clod,' as she contemptuously called him to herself, had the power to make her feel a weak, undisciplined child by merely never losing his self-control.

There would have been consolation in the thought that in his stupidity he did not understand how she despised him, how infinitely beneath her she considered him, had it not been darkened by the suspicion that he understood perfectly well *and didn't care*.

How dared he, how dared he!

She had complained of his familiar manner to her brother a day or two after her arrival. But he had given her neither support nor consolation.

"My dear Nora," he said, "we are not back in England. The sooner you forget all the old notions of class and class distinctions, the happier you'll be. They won't go here. As long as a man's straight, honest and a worker—and Frank's all three—it doesn't make any odds whether he's working for himself or for someone else. We're all on the same footing. It is only due to the fact that I've had two good years in succession that I'm not somebody's 'hired man' myself."

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"Don't, Eddie, don't; you don't realize how you hurt me."

"My dear girl, I'm sorry; but I'm in dead earnest."

"You, a hired man? Oh, I can't believe it."

"It's true, nevertheless. Plenty of better fellows than I have had to do it. When you're starting in, unless you have a good deal bigger capital than I had, you only need to be hailed out, frosted out, or weeded out a couple of years in succession to use up your little stake, and then where are you?"

"What do you mean by 'weeded out'?"

He was just about to explain when a halloo from the stables cut him short. "There's Frank now. I ought to be out helping him this minute; we've got a good stiff drive ahead of us. You ask Gertie about it, she'll explain it to you."

But Gertie had been deeply preoccupied with some domestic problem and Nora had forborne to question her. She had intended returning to the subject that evening, but Eddie and Gertie were deep in one of their conferences until nearly bedtime. It would never have suggested itself to her to seek any information from the objectionable Frank, so under cover of a heated discussion between him and Trotter, she appealed to Reggie.

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"What does it mean to be weeded out?"

"Oh, Lord, I don't know! Kicked out, I suppose. Isn't there something in the Bible about tares and wheat?"

"Nonsense; it doesn't mean that. I'd forgotten, by the way, how strong you were on Biblical references. Do you remember your discussion about Sarah and Benjamin with Agnes Pringle?"

"Of course I do. And I completely stumped her; don't you recollect?"

"Goose! She only wanted to make you look it up for yourself. But being 'weeded out' is something disastrous that happens to the farmers here, like having the crops frozen."

"Well, it hasn't happened since I've been here, anyway. But I'll bet you a bob it means kicked out. I tell you, I'll ask Gertie if she doesn't think that I ought to be weeded out."

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"You'd better not," laughed Nora.

The first open quarrel had taken place one day at dinner.

The night before Nora had proposed making her first attempt at baking bread. Gertie had given a grudging consent. Everything had gone well until the bread, once in the oven, Nora had gone to her room to add some pages to a long letter which she had begun, some evenings before to Agnes Pringle.

Gertie had been out in one of the barns most of the morning engaged in some mysterious task which she had been reserving until the weather became milder—there had been a decided thaw, setting in the day before—and Nora intended to be gone only a short time.

Filled with a warm feeling of gratitude to Miss Pringle for her generous loan of the ten-pound note, she was writing her a long letter in the form of a diary describing her voyage across the

Atlantic and the trip across the Continent, both of which she was sure would greatly interest her friend and furnish her with topics for her tête-à-tête dinners with the excellent Mrs. Hubbard for some days to come.

Of the difficulties and disappointments in her new life she was resolved to say nothing. Nora hated to confess that she had failed in anything. And, so far, she could hardly say that she had made a success. Later on, she might have to acknowledge that her move had been a mistake. But for the moment she would confine herself to describing all that struck her as novel and strange while the impression was still fresh, while she still had the 'seeing eye.'

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"When I came to the end of my last page (and I remember that I was getting extremely sleepy at that point)," she wrote, "I had just finished describing the exterior of my brother's house to you. I am sure I can never do justice to the interior! You can never have seen, much less imagined, anything in the least like it. I have decided, upon reflection, that it is the most un-English thing I have seen yet: and I have not forgotten those strange railway carriages either.

"Try to imagine a large room, longer than it is deep, at once living-room, dining-room and kitchen; with nothing but rough brown boards for walls, on which—some framed, some unframed—are the colored supplements of the Christmas illustrated papers, both English and American. Over one of the doors is a magnificent trophy—at least that is what we would call it at home—I think it is a moose. I am not at all sure, although I have been told more than once. Over another door is a large clock, such a one as one finds in a broker's office with us. The floor is covered with what is called oilcloth—I wonder why: it certainly is not the least like cloth—very new and excessively shiny. It has a conventional pattern in black and white, and when the sun shines on it, it quite dazzles one's eyes.

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"There are two windows, one to the south, the other looking west. The western view is magnificent. I feel as if I could see straight away to the setting sun! In the summer, when the prairie is one great waving green sea, it must be superb. Two days ago it was covered with snow. As I write, I can see great patches of brown every here and there, for we have had a sudden thaw. The window sills are filled with geraniums planted, my dear, in tins which once contained syrup, of which everyone here, including my brother, seems extravagantly fond. The syrup jug appears regularly at every meal and is almost the first thing put on the table. I have yet to acquire a taste for it—which they all think extremely queer.

"The furniture consists of two American rockers and a number of kitchen chairs; an unvarnished deal dresser covered with earthenware;—I don't think there are any two pieces that match!—two tables, one a dining table; a bookcase containing a few paper-backed novels and some magazines, none so recent, however, as those I saw before I left England; and last and most important, an enormous American cooking stove.

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"Our principal meal, called dinner, is——"

Great heavens, her bread!

Nora dashed from her room. Gertie was standing at one of the windows in the unwonted indulgence of a moment's leisure. Nora threw open the oven door. It was empty.

"Oh, did you look after my loaf, Gertie? I'm so sorry; I quite forgot it."

"Yes, I took it out a few moments ago."

She still had her face turned toward the window, so Nora did not see the smile that curled her lip. She turned after a moment, and the two women began to set the table for dinner.

Presently the men were heard laughing outside as they cleaned their muddy boots on the scraper. Reggie had apparently achieved something new. His ignorance of everything pertaining to farming furnished the material for most of the amusement that was going. Fortunately, he was always good-natured. Gertie, with unusual good spirits, entered into the joke of the thing at once and even bantered Reggie playfully upon his latest discovery.

Nora did not even hear what it was all about. She was searching for the bread plate which always stood on the dresser.

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"Why, Gertie, I——"

"It's all right," said Gertie, without looking up from pouring the tea. "I took it. I'll get it in a minute. Come, sit down."

Nora obeyed.

Hornby was just about to begin his explanation for whatever it was he had done, when Eddie interrupted him:

"Hold on a minute, Reg. I want some bread. I declare you two girls are getting to be as bad as Reggie, here. Setting a table without bread!"

"I was keeping it for a surprise," said Gertie, getting up slowly. "I want you to appreciate the fact that Nora helped me by doing the baking this morning." Nora's face flushed with pleasure as her brother patted her on the shoulder with evident approval. She looked at Gertie with eyes shining with gratitude. At that moment she came nearer liking her sister-in-law than she ever was to again.

Gertie went slowly across the room—she usually moved with nervous quickness—and picking up the missing bread plate from where it was leaning against the wall behind the stove went into the little pantry that gave off the kitchen. Slowly she returned and stood beside her husband's chair. On the plate, burned almost to a cinder, was the loaf of bread that Nora had forgotten.

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"Here it is," said Gertie. Her smile was cruel.

"Oh, I say, Gertie, that's too bad of you." It was Frank who spoke.

"Too bad!" Nora sprung to her feet with flashing eyes. "Too bad. It's mean and despicable. There are no words to do it justice. But what could I expect from——"

"Nora!" said her brother sharply.

Nora rushed from the table to her room. And although Eddie knocked repeatedly at her door and begged her to let him speak with her if only for a moment that evening at supper-time, she made no sign nor did anyone see her again that night.

She made a point of not coming down to breakfast the next morning until after the time when the men would be gone. She thought it best to meet Gertie alone. It was time that they came to some sort of understanding. To her surprise and annoyance Taylor was still at the table. Gertie was nowhere to be seen.

"Come down to keep me company? That's real nice of you, I'm sure."

"I supposed, naturally, that you had gone. You usually have at this hour."

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"You don't know how it flatters a fellow to have women folks study his habits like that," he said with a grin.

"I knew that my brother had left the house, since I saw him go. I took it for granted that all his employees left when he did. Let me assure you, once and for all, that your habits are of no possible interest to me."

Taylor put on his hat and went to the door. Just as he was about to open it, he changed his mind and came back to the table where Nora had seated herself and stood leaning on the back of his chair looking down at her.

"It's all right for us to row," he said, "but if I were you I'd go a little easy with Gertie. She's all right and a good sort at bottom, you can take it from me. Yesterday, I admit she was downright nasty. I guess you rile her up more than she's used to. But I want to see you two get on."

"It's my turn to feel flattered," said Nora sarcastically.

"Well, so long," he said with undiminished good humor as he went out.

Gertie appeared almost at once from the pantry.

"I heard what he said. I couldn't help it. He was right—about us both. We don't hit it off. But I'm willing to give it another try."

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"I have little choice but to agree with you," said Nora bitterly.

"Well, that's hardly the way to begin," retorted Gertie angrily.

There was a certain air of restraint about them ail when they came in to dinner. Eddie looked both worried and anxious. But as he saw that the two women were going about their duties much the same as usual, he argued that the storm had blown over and brightened visibly.

The men had pushed back their chairs and were preparing to light their after-dinner pipes.

"We'll be able to start on the ironing this afternoon," said Gertie, addressing Nora for the first time since breakfast.

"Very well."

"I say," said Trotter, who rarely ventured on a remark while at the table, "it was a rare big wash you done this morning by the look of it on the line."

"When she's been out in this country a bit longer, Nora'll learn not to wear more things than she can help," said Gertie.

As a matter of fact, she had no intention of criticising Nora at the moment. She meant, merely, that she would be more economical with experience. But Nora was in the mood to take fire at once.

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"Was there more than my fair share?" she asked sharply.

"You use double the number of stockings than what I do. And everything else is the same."

"I see. Clean but incompetent."

"There's many a true word spoken in jest," said Gertie with angry emphasis.

"Say, Reg," Taylor broke in hastily, "is it true that when you first came out you asked Ed where the bath-room was?"

"That's right," laughed Trotter. "Ed told 'im there was a river a mile and a 'alf from 'ere, an' that was the only bath-room 'e knowed."

"One gets used to that sort of thing, eh, Reg?" said Marsh good-naturedly.

"Ra-ther. If I saw a proper bath-room *now*, it would only make me feel nervous."

"I knew a couple of Englishmen out in British Columbia," broke in Taylor, "who were bathing, and the only other people around were Indians. The first two years they were there, they wouldn't have anything to do with the Indians because they were so dirty. After that the Indians wouldn't have anything to do with them."

He pointed this delectable anecdote by holding his nose.

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"What a disgusting story!" said Nora.

"D'you think so? I rather like it."

"*You* would."

"Now don't start quarreling, you two. And on Frank's last day."

Nora gave her brother a quick glance. It was on the tip of her tongue to ask what he meant by Frank's last day, but seeing that Taylor was watching her with an amused smile, she held her tongue. Getting up, she began clearing away the table.

Hornby, ramming the tobacco into his pipe, went over to the corner by the stove, where Gertie was scalding out her large dishpan, and tried to interest her in the number of logs he had split since breakfast, without conspicuous success.

Trotter stood looking out of the window, while Marsh stretched himself lazily in one of the rocking chairs with a sigh of content. Things were beginning to shake down a little better. There had been a time yesterday when he feared that everything was off. He knew Nora's temper of old and he knew his wife's jealous fear of her criticism. It would take some rubbing to wear off the sharp corners. But things were coming out all right, after all. They'd soon be working together like a well-broken team. Gertie had been nasty about the bread. But apparently everything was patched up. And with Frank once gone, and the new chap—a man of the Trotter type, who would never obtrude himself—he foresaw that everything would run on wheels, an idea dear to his peace-loving soul.

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Not that he was not sorry to lose Frank. In the first place, he liked him, and then he was a good, steady, hard-working fellow, one of the kind you didn't have to stand over. But, naturally, he wanted to get back to his own place, now that he had saved up a bit. Every man liked being his own master.

Taylor alone had remained at his place at the table. Nora had cleared away everything except the dishes at his place. She never went near him if she could avoid it.

"I guess I'm in your way," he said, rising.

"Not more than usual, thank you."

Taylor gave a little laugh.

"I guess you'll not be sorry to see the last of me."

Nora paused in her work, and leaning on the table with both hands, looked him steadily in the face.

"I can't honestly say that it makes the least difference to me whether you go or stay," she said coldly.

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"When does your train go, Frank?" asked Hornby from his corner.

"Half-past three; I'll be starting from here in about an hour."

"Reg can go over with you and drive the rig back again," said Marsh.

"All right. I'll go and dress myself in a bit."

"I guess you'll be glad to get back to your own place," said Gertie warmly.

She had always liked Frank Taylor—a man who worked hard and earned his money. She did not begrudge him a cent of it, nor the pleasure he had in the thought of getting back to his own place. He was the kind of man who should set up for himself.

"Well, I guess I'll not be sorry." He sat looking out of the window with a sort of dreamy air, as if seeing far to the westward his own land.

So that was the reason for his going. He had a place of his own. He was only a hired man for the moment. Eddie had told her that a man frequently had to hire out after a succession of bad seasons. What of it? His keeping it to himself was the crowning impertinence!

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CHAPTER VIII

"I'll do the washing, Nora, and you can dry," said Gertie in that peculiar tone which Nora had learned to recognize as the preface to something disagreeable.

"All right."

"I've noticed the things aren't half clean when I leave them to you to do."

"I'm sorry; why didn't you tell me?"

"I suppose you never did the washing-up in England. Too grand?"

But Nora was not to be ruffled just now. Her resentment against Taylor, who was sitting watching her as if he read her thoughts—she often wondered how much of them he *did* read—made anything Gertie said seem momentarily unimportant.

"I don't suppose anyone would wash up if they could help it. It's not very amusing."

"You always want to be amused?"

"No, but I want to be happy."

"Well," said Gertie sharply, "you've got a roof over your head and a comfortable bed to sleep in, three good meals a day and plenty to do. That's all anybody wants to make them happy, I guess." [Pg 121]

"Oh, Lord!" exclaimed Reggie from his corner.

"Well," said Gertie, turning sharply on him, "if you don't like Canada, why did you come out?"

"You don't suppose," said Hornby, rising slowly to his feet, "I'd have let them send me if I'd have known what I was in for, do you? Not much. Up at five in the morning and working about the place like a navvy till your back feels as if it 'ud break, and then back again in the afternoon. And the same thing day after day. What was the good of sending me to Harrow and Oxford if that's what I've got to do all my life?"

There was a tragic dignity in his tone which for the moment held even Gertie silent. It was her husband who answered him, and Gertie's jealous ear detected a certain wistfulness in his voice.

"You'll get used to it soon enough, Reg. It *is* a bit hard at first, I'll admit. But when you get your foot in, you wouldn't change it for any other life."

"This isn't a country for a man to go to sleep in and wait for something to turn up," said Gertie aggressively. [Pg 122]

"I wouldn't go back to England now, not for nothing," said Trotter, stung to an unusual burst of eloquence. "England! Eighteen bob a week, that's what I earned. And no prospects. Out of work five months in the year."

"What did you do in England!" asked Nora curiously.

"Bricklayer, Miss."

"You needn't call her Miss," said Gertie heatedly. "You call me Gertie, don't you? Well, *her* name's Nora."

"What with strikes and bad times," went on Trotter unheeding, "you never knew where you was. And the foreman always bullying you. I don't know what all. I 'ad about enough of it, I can tell you. I've never been out of work since the day I landed. I've 'ad as much to eat as I wanted and I'm saving money. In this country everybody's as good as everybody else."

"If not better," said Nora dryly.

"In two years I shall be able to set up for myself. Why, there's old man Thompson, up at Pratt. *He* started as a bricklayer, same as I. Come from Yorkshire, he did. He's got seven thousand dollars in the bank now."

"Believe me, you fellows who come out now have a much softer thing of it than I did when I first came. In those days they wouldn't have an Englishman, they'd have a Galician rather. In Winnipeg, when they advertised in the paper for labor, you'd see often as not: 'No English need apply.'" [Pg 123]

"Well, it was their own fault," stormed Gertie. "They wouldn't work or anything. They just soaked."

"It *was* their own fault, right enough. This was the dumping ground for all the idlers, drunkards and scallywags in England. They had the delusion over there that if a man was too big a rotter to do anything at all at home, he'd only got to be sent out here and he'd make a fortune."

"I guess things ain't as bad as that now," spoke up Taylor. "They send us a different class. It takes an Englishman two years longer than anybody else to get the hang of things, but when once he tumbles to it, he's better than any of them."

"Ah, well!" said Marsh, knocking the ashes out of his pipe, "I guess nowadays everyone's glad to

see the Englishman make good. When I nearly smashed up three years ago, I had no end of offers of help."

"How *did* you nearly smash up?" asked Hornby interestedly.

"Oh, I had a run of bad luck. One year the crop was frosted and the next year I was hailed out. It wants a good deal of capital to stand up against that." [Pg 124]

"That's what happened to me," said Taylor. "I was hailed out and I hadn't got any capital, so I just had to hire out." He turned suddenly to Nora. "If it hadn't been for that hail storm you wouldn't have had the pleasure of makin' my acquaintance."

"How hollow and empty life would have been without that!" she said ironically.

"I wonder you didn't just quit and start out Calgary way," put in Gertie.

"Well," said Taylor slowly, "it was this way: I'd put in two years on my homestead and done a lot of clearing. It seemed kind of silly to lose my rights after all that. Then, too, when you've been hailed out once, the chances are it won't happen again, for some years that is, and by that time I ought to have a bit put by."

"What sort of house have you got?" asked Nora.

"Well, it ain't what you might call a palace, but it's large enough for two."

"Thinking of marrying, Frank?" asked Marsh.

"Well, I guess it's kind of lonesome on a farm without a woman. But it's not so easy to find a wife when you're just starting on your own. Canadian girls think twice before taking a farmer." [Pg 125]

"They know something, I guess," said Gertie grimly.

"You took me, Gertie," laughed her husband.

"Not because I wanted to, you can be sure of that. I don't know how you got round me."

"I wonder."

"I guess it was because you was kind of helpless, and I didn't know what you'd do without me."

"I guess it was love, and you couldn't help yourself." Gertie stopped her work long enough to make a little grimacing protest.

"I'm thinking of going to one of them employment agencies when I get to Winnipeg," said Taylor, moving his chair so that he could watch Nora's face, "and looking the girls over."

"Like sheep," said Nora scornfully.

"I don't know anything about sheep. I've never had to do with sheep."

"And may I ask, do you think that you know anything about women?"

"I guess I can tell if they're strong and willing. And so long as they ain't cock-eyed, I don't mind taking the rest on trust."

"And what inducement is there for a girl to have you?" [Pg 126]

"That's why he wants to catch 'em young, when they're just landed and don't know much," laughed Trotter uproariously.

"I've got my quarter-section," went on the imperturbable Frank, quite undisturbed by the laughter caused by Trotter's sally, "a good hundred and sixty acres with seventy of it cleared. And I've got a shack that I built myself. That's something, ain't it?"

"You've got a home to offer and enough to eat and drink. A girl can get that anywhere. Why, I'm told they're simply begging for service."

"Y-e-e-s. But you see some girls like getting married. There's something in the word that appeals to them."

"You seem to think that a girl would jump at the chance of marrying you!" said Nora with rising temper.

"She might do worse."

"I must say I think you flatter yourself."

"Oh, I don't know. I know my job, and there ain't too many as can say that. I've got brains."

"What makes you think so?"

"Well, I can see you're no fool."

Gertie chuckled with amusement. "He certainly put one over on you then, Nora." [Pg 127]

"Because you've got no use for me, there's no saying but what others may have."

"I forgot that there's no accounting for tastes."

"I can try, can't I?"

Wishing to escape any further conversation with the object of her detestation, and seeing her opportunity now that the dishes were washed, Nora started to empty the dishpan in the sink in the pantry. But Gertie, who divined her motive and wished the sport to continue, forestalled her.

"I'll do it," she said. "You finish wiping the dishes."

"It's very wise of you to go to an agency," said Nora in answer to his last question. "A girl's more likely to marry you when she's only seen you once than when she's seen you often."

"It seems to make you quite mad, the thought of me marrying!" with a wink at the others.

"You wouldn't talk about it like that unless you looked down upon women. Oh, how I pity the poor wretched creature who becomes your wife!"

"Oh, I guess she won't have such a bad time—when I've broken her in to my ways."

"And are you under the impression that you can do that?"

"Yep."

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"You're not expecting that there'll be much love lost between you and the girl whom you—you honor with your choice?"

"What's love got to do with it?" asked Taylor in affected surprise. "It's a business undertaking."

"What!" Nora's eyes were dark with indignation and anger.

"None at all. I give her board and lodging and the charm of my society. And in return, she's got to cook and bake and wash and keep the shack clean and tidy. And if she can do that, I'll not be particular what she looks like."

"So long as she's not cock-eyed," Reggie reminded him.

"No, I draw the line at that."

"I beg your pardon," said Nora with bitter irony; "I didn't know it was a general servant you wanted. You spend a dollar and a half on a marriage license and then you don't have to pay any wages. It's a good investment."

For the first time she seemed to have pierced the enemy's armor.

"You've got a sharp tongue in your head for a girl, Nora."

"Please don't call me Nora."

"Don't be so silly, Nora," said her brother with a trace of irritation. "It's the custom of the country. Why, they all call me Ed."

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"I don't care what the custom of the country is. I'm not going to be called Nora by the hired man!"

"Don't you bother, Ed," said Frank, apparently once more restored to his normal placidity; "I'll call her Miss Marsh if she likes it better."

But Nora was not to be pacified. He wouldn't have dared take such a liberty with her had he not been on the eve of going away for good, she told herself. It was a last shot from a retreating enemy. Well and good. He should hear, if for the last time, what she thought of him!

"I should like to see you married to someone who'd give you what you deserved. I'd like to see your pride humbled. You think yourself very high and mighty, don't you? I'd like to see a woman take you by the heartstrings and wring them till you screamed with pain."

"Oh, Nora, how violent you are!" said Ed.

"You're overbearing, supercilious and egotistic," went on Nora biting.

"I'm not sure as I know what them long words means, but I guess they ain't exactly complimentary."

"I guess they ain't," she mimicked.

"I'm sorry for that." Taylor straightened himself a little in his chair. His blue eyes seemed to have caught a little of the light from Nora's.

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"I was thinking of offering you the position before I went to the employment agency."

"How dare you speak to me like that!"

"Don't fly into a temper, Nora," said Ed. While he didn't blame Frank, he wished he had not made that last speech. Why didn't he go and get ready for town? Here was Nora all upset again just as things had calmed down a bit!

"He's got no right to say impudent things to me!"

"Don't you see he's only having a joke with you?" he said soothingly.

"He shouldn't joke. He's got no sense of humor."

She made a furious gesture, and the cup she was in the act of wiping flew out of her hand, crashing in a thousand pieces on the floor, just as Gertie returned.

"Butter fingers!"

"I'm so sorry," said Nora in a colorless tone. She was raging inwardly at having allowed that beast of a man to put her in such a temper. Why couldn't she control herself? How undignified to bandy words with a person she so despised. It was hardly the moment for Gertie to take her to task for carelessness. But Gertie was not the person to consider other moods than her own.

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"You clumsy thing! You're always doing something wrong."

"Oh, don't worry; I'll pay for it."

"Who wants you to pay for it? Do you think I can't afford to pay for a miserable cup! You might say you're sorry: that's all I want you to do."

"I said I was sorry."

"No, you didn't."

"I heard her, Gertie," broke in Ed.

"She said she was sorry as if she was doing me a favor," said Gertie, turning furiously on the would-be peacemaker.

"You don't expect me to go down on my knees to you, do you? The cup's worth twopence."

"It isn't the value I'm thinking about, it's the carelessness."

"It's only the third thing I've broken since I've been here."

If Nora had been in a calmer mood herself she would not have been so stupid as to attempt to palliate her offense. Her offer of replacing the miserable cup only added fuel to the flame of Gertie's resentment.

"You can't do anything!" she stormed. "You're more helpless than a child of six. You're all the same, all of you."

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"You're not going to abuse the whole British nation because I've broken a cup worth twopence, are you?"

"And the airs you put on. Condescending isn't the word. It's enough to try the patience of a saint."

"Oh, shut up!" said Marsh. He went over to his wife and laid a hand on her shoulder. She shook him off impatiently.

"You've never done a stroke of work in your life, and you come here and think you can teach me everything."

"I don't know about that," said Nora, in a voice which by comparison with Gertie's seemed low but which was nevertheless perfectly audible to every person in the room. "I don't know about that, but I think I can teach you manners."

If she had lashed the other woman across the face with a whip, she couldn't have cut more deeply. She knew that, and was glad. Gertie's face turned gray.

"How dare you say that! How dare you! You come here, and I give you a home. You sleep in my blankets and you eat my food and then you insult me." She burst into a passion of angry tears.

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"Now then, Gertie, don't cry. Don't be so silly," said her husband as he might have spoken to an angry child.

"Oh, leave me alone," she flashed back at him. "Of course you take her part. You would! It's nothing to you that I have made a slave of myself for you for three whole years. As soon as *she* comes along and plays the lady——"

She rushed from the room. After a moment, Ed followed after her.

There was an awkward pause. Nora stood leaning against the table swinging the dishcloth in her hand, a smile of malicious triumph on her face. Gertie had tried it on once too often. But she had shown her that one could go too far. She would think twice before she attempted to bully her again, especially before other people. She stooped down and began to gather up the broken pieces of earthenware scattered about her feet. Her movement broke the spell which had held the three men paralyzed as men always are in the presence of quarreling women.

"I reckon I might be cleaning myself," said Taylor, rising from his chair. "Time's getting on. You're coming, Ben?"

"Yes, I'm coming. I suppose you'll take the mare?"

[Pg 134]

"Yep, that's what Ed said this morning."

They went out toward the stables without a word to Nora.

"Well, are you enjoying the land of promise as much as you said that I should?" Hornby asked with a smile.

"We've both made our beds, I suppose we must lie in them," said Nora, shaking the broken pieces out of her apron into a basket that stood in the corner.

"Do you remember that afternoon at Miss Wickham's when I came for the letter to your brother?"

"I hadn't much intention of coming to Canada then myself."

"Well, I don't mind telling you that I mean to get back to England the very first opportunity that comes," he said, pacing up and down the floor. "I'm willing to give away my share of the White Man's Burden with a package of chewing gum."

"You prefer the Effete East?" smiled Nora, putting a couple of irons on the stove.

"Ra-ther. Give me the degrading influence of a decadent civilization every time."

"Your father *will* be pleased to see you, won't he?"

"I don't think! Of course I was a damned fool ever to leave Winnipeg."

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"I understand you didn't until you had to."

"Say," said Hornby, pausing in his walk, "I want to tell you: your brother behaved like a perfect brick. I sent him your letter and told him I was up against it—d'you know I hadn't a bob? I was jolly glad to earn half a dollar digging a pit in a man's garden. Bit thick, you know!"

"I can see you," laughed Nora.

"Your brother sent me the fare to come on here and told me I could do the chores. I didn't know what they were. I soon found it was doing all the jobs it wasn't anybody else's job to do. And they call it God's own country!"

"I think you're falling into the *ways* of the country very well, however!" retorted Nora as she struggled across to the table with the heavy ironing-board.

"Do you? What makes you think that?"

"You can stand there and smoke your pipe and watch me carry the ironing-board about."

"I beg your pardon. Did you want me to help you?"

"Never mind. It would remind me of home."

"I suppose I shall have to stick it out at least a year, unless I can humbug the mater into sending me enough money to get back home with."

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"She won't send you a penny—if she's wise."

"Oh, come now! Wouldn't you chuck it if you could?"

"And acknowledge myself beaten," said Nora, with a flash of spirit. "You don't know," she went on after ironing busily a moment, "what I went through before I came here. I tried to get another position as lady's companion. I hung about the agents' offices. I answered advertisements. Two people offered to take me; one without any salary, the other at ten shillings a week and my lunch. I, if you please, was to find myself in board, lodging and clothes on that magnificent sum! That settled *me*. I wrote Eddie and said I was coming. When I'd paid my fare, I had eight pounds in the world—after ten years with Miss Wickham. When he met me at the station at Dyer——"

"Depot; you forget."

"My whole fortune consisted of seven dollars and thirty-five cents; I think it was thirty-five."

"What about that wood you're splitting, Reg?" said a voice from the doorway.

Eddie came in fumbling nervously in his pockets. He detested scenes and had some reason to think that he was having more than his share of them in the last few days.

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"Has anyone seen my tobacco! Oh, here it is," he said, taking his pouch from his pocket. "Come, Reg, you'd better be getting on with it."

"Oh, Lord, is there no rest for the wicked?" exclaimed Hornby as he lounged lazily to the door.

"Don't hurry yourself, will you?"

"Brilliant sarcasm is just flying about this house to-day," was his parting shot as he banged the door behind him.

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CHAPTER IX

Nora understood perfectly that her brother had been forced to take a stand as a result of this last quarrel with Gertie. Well, she was glad of it. Things certainly could not go on in this way forever. Of course he would have to make a show, at least, of taking his wife's part. But, equally of course, he would understand her position perfectly. However much his new life and his long absence from England might have changed him, at bottom their points of view were still the same. He and she, so to speak, spoke a common language; she and Gertie did not.

Gertie had probably been pouring out her accumulation of grievances to him for the last half hour. Now it was her turn. She would show that she was, as always, more than ready to meet Gertie half-way. It would be his affair to see that her advances were received in better part in future than they had been.

She went on busily with her ironing, waiting for him to begin. But Eddie seemed to experience a certain embarrassment in coming to the subject. While she took article after article from the clothes-basket at her side, he wandered about the room aimlessly, puffing at a pipe which seemed never to stay lighted.



MARRIED-THOUGH SECRETLY ENEMIES.

"That's the toughest nut I've ever been set to crack," he said at length, pointing his pipestem after the vanished Hornby. "Why on earth did you give him a letter to me?" [Pg 139]

"He asked me to. I couldn't very well say no."

"I can't make out what people are up to in the old country. They think that if a man is too big a rotter to do anything at all in England, they've only got to send him out here and he'll make a fortune."

"He may improve."

"I hope so. Look here, Nora, you've thoroughly upset Gertie."

"She's very easily upset, isn't she?"

"It's only since you came that things haven't gone right. We never used to have scenes."

"So you blame me. I came prepared to like her and help her. She met all my advances with suspicion."

"She thinks you look down on her. You ought to remember that she never had your opportunities. She's earned her own living from the time she was thirteen. You can't expect in her the refinements of a woman who's led the protected life you have." [Pg 140]

"Now, Eddie, I haven't said a word that could be turned into the least suggestion of disapproval of anything she did."

"My dear, your whole manner has expressed disapproval. You won't do things in the way we do them. After all, the way you lived in Tunbridge Wells isn't the only way people can live. Our ways suit us, and when you live amongst us you must adopt them."

"She's never given me a chance to learn them," said Nora obstinately. "She treated me with suspicion and enmity the very first day I came here. When she sneered at me because I talked of a station instead of a depot, of *course* I went on talking of a station. What do you think I'm made of? Because I prefer to drink water with my meals instead of your strong tea, she says I'm putting on airs."

Marsh made a pleading gesture.

"Why can't you humor her? You see, you've got to take the blame for all the English people who

came here in the past and were lazy, worthless and supercilious. They called us Colonials and turned up their noses at us. What do you expect us to do?—say, 'Thank you very much, sir.' 'We know we're not worthy to black your boots.' 'Don't bother to work, it'll be a pleasure for us to give you money?' It's no good blinking the fact. There was a great prejudice against the English. But it's giving way now, and every sensible man and woman who comes out can do something to destroy it."

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"All I can say," said Nora, going over to the stove to change her iron, "is if you're tired of having me here, I can go back to Winnipeg. I shan't have any difficulty in finding something to do."

"Good Lord, I don't want you to go. I like having you here. It's—it's company for Gertie. And jobs aren't so easy to find as you think, especially now the winter's coming on; everyone wants a job in the city."

"What do you want me to do?"

"I want you to make the best of things and meet her half-way. You must make allowances for her even if you think her unreasonable. It's Gertie you've got to spend most of your time with."

He was so manifestly distressed and, as he hadn't been so hard on her as she had expected and in her own heart felt that she deserved, Nora softened at once.

"I'll have a try."

"That's a good girl. And I think you ought to apologize to her for what you said just now."

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"I?" said Nora, aflame at once. "I've got nothing to apologize for. She drove me to distraction."

There was a moment's pause while Eddie softly damned the pipe he had forgotten to fill, for not keeping lighted.

"She says she won't speak to you again unless you beg her pardon."

"Really! Does she look upon that as a great hardship?"

"My dear! We're twelve miles from the nearest store. We're thrown upon each other for the entire winter. Last year there was a bad blizzard, and we didn't see a soul outside the farm for six weeks. Unless we learn to put up with one another's whims, life becomes a perfect hell."

Nora stopped her work and set down her iron.

"You can go on talking all night, Eddie, I'll never apologize. Time after time when she sneered at me till my blood boiled, I've kept my temper. She deserved ten times more than I said. Do you think I'm going to knuckle under to a woman like that?"

"Remember she's my wife, Nora."

"Why didn't you marry a lady?"

"What the dickens do you think is the use of being a lady out here?"

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"You've degenerated since you left England."

"Now look here, my dear, I'll just tell you what Gertie did for me. She was a waitress in Winnipeg at the Minnedosa Hotel, and she was making money. She knew what the life was on a farm—much harder than anything she'd been used to in the city—but she accepted all the hardship of it and the monotony of it, because—because she loved me."

"She thought it a good match. You were a gentleman."

"Fiddledidee! She had the chance of much better men than me. And when——"

"Such men as Frank Taylor, no doubt."

"And when I lost my harvest two years running, do you know what she did? She went back to the hotel in Winnipeg for the winter, so as to carry things on till the next harvest. And at the end of the winter, she gave me every cent she'd earned to pay the interest of my mortgage and the installments on the machinery."

Nora had been more moved by this recital than she would have cared to confess. She turned away her head to hide that her eyes had filled with tears. After all, a woman who could show such devotion as that, and to her brother—— Yes, she would try again.

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"Very well: I'll apologize. But leave me alone with her. I—I don't think I could do it even before you, Eddie."

"Fine! That's a good girl. I'll go and tell her."

Nora felt repaid in advance for any sacrifice to her pride as he beamed on her, all the look of worry gone. She was once more busy at her ironing-board, bending low over her work to hide her confusion, when he returned with Gertie. A glance at her sister-in-law told her that there was to be no unbending in that quarter until she had made proper atonement. There was little conciliatory about that sullen face.

However, she made an effort to speak lightly until, once Eddie had taken his departure, she could

make her apology.

"I've been getting on famously with the ironing."

"Have you?"

"This is one of the few things I *can* do all right."

"Any child can iron."

"Well, I'll be going down to the shed," said her brother uneasily.

"What for?" said Gertie quickly.

"I want to see about mending that door. It hasn't been closing right."

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"I thought Nora had something to say to me."

"So she has: that's what I'm going to leaves you alone for."

"I like that. She insults me before everybody and then, when she's going to apologize, it's got to be private. No, thank you."

"What do you mean, Gertie?" asked Nora.

"You sent Ed in to tell me you was goin' to apologize for what you'd said, didn't you?"

"And I'm ready to: for peace and quietness."

"Well, what you said was before the men, and it's before the men you must say you're sorry."

"How can you ask me to do such a thing!" cried Nora indignantly.

"Don't be rough on her, Gertie," pleaded her husband. "No one likes apologizing."

"People who don't like apologizing should keep a better lookout on their tongue."

"It can't do you any good to make her eat humble pie before the men."

"Perhaps it won't do *me* any good, but it'll do *her* good!"

"Gertie, don't be cruel. I'm sorry if I lost my temper just now, and said anything that hurt you. But please don't make me humiliate myself before the others."

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"I've made up my mind," said Gertie, folding her arms across her breast, "so it's no good talking."

"Don't you see that it's bad enough to have to beg your pardon before Eddie?"

"Good Lord!" said Gertie irritably, "why can't you call him Ed like the rest of us. 'Eddie' sounds so sappy."

"I've called him Eddie all my life: it's what our mother called him," said Nora sadly.

"Oh, it's all of a piece. You do everything you can to make yourself different from all of us."

She stalked over to the window and stood with folded arms looking out toward the wood-pile on which Reggie was seated—it is to be presumed having a moment's respite after his arduous labors.

"No, I don't," pleaded Nora. "At least I don't mean to. Why won't you give me any credit for trying to do my best to please you?"

"That's neither here nor there." She suddenly wheeled about, facing them both. "Go and fetch the men, Ed, and then I'll hear what she's got to say."

"No, I won't, I won't, I won't!" cried Nora furiously. "You drive me too far."

"You won't beg my pardon?" demanded Gertie threateningly. If she wished to drive Nora beside herself, she accomplished her purpose.

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"I said I could teach you manners," she gave a hysterical laugh, "I made a mistake. I *couldn't* teach you manners, for one can't make a silk purse out of a sow's ear."

"Shut up, Nora," said her brother sharply.

"Now you must make her, Ed," said Gertie grimly.

He replied with a despairing gesture.

"I'm sick to death of the pair of you!"

"I'm your wife, and I'm going to be mistress of this house—my house."

"It's horrible to make her eat humble pie before three strange men. You've no right to ask her to do a thing like that."

"Are you taking her part?" demanded Gertie, her voice rising in fury. "What's come over you since she came here. You're not the same to me as you used to be. Why did she come here and get between us?"

"I haven't changed."

"Haven't I been a good wife to you? Have you ever had any complaint to make of me?"

"You know perfectly well I haven't."

"As soon as your precious sister comes along, you let me be insulted. You don't say a word to defend *me!*"

"Darling," said her husband with grim humor, "you've said a good many to defend yourself." [Pg 148]

But Gertie was not to be reached by humor, grim or otherwise.

"I'm sick and tired of being put upon. You must choose between us," she said, with an air of finality.

"What on earth do you mean?"

"If you don't make her apologize right now before the hired men, I'm quit of you."

"I can't make her apologize if she won't."

"Then let her quit."

"Oh, I wish I could! I wish to God I could!" said Nora wildly.

"You know she can't do that," said Marsh roughly. "There's nowhere she can go. I've offered her a home. You were quite willing, when I suggested having her here."

"I was willing because I thought she'd make herself useful. We can't afford to feed folks who don't earn their keep. We have to work for our money, we do."

"I didn't know you grudged me the little I eat," said Nora bitterly. "I wonder if I should begrudge it to you, if I were in your place."

"Look here, it's no good talking. I'm not going to turn her out. As long as she wants a home, the farm's open to her. And she's welcome to everything I've got." [Pg 149]

"Then you choose her?" demanded Gertie.

"Choose her? I don't know what you're talking about!" Easy-going as he was, he was beginning to show signs of irritation.

"I said you'd got to choose between us. Very well, let her stay. I earned my own living before, and I can earn it again. *I'm* going."

"Don't talk such nonsense," said Marsh violently.

"You think I don't mean it? D'you think I'm going to stay here and be put upon? Why should I?"

"Don't you—love me any more?"

"Haven't I shown that I love you? Have you forgotten, Ed?"

"We've gone through so much together, darling," he said huskily.

"Yes, we have that," she said in a softened tone.

"Won't you forgive her, for—for my sake?"

Gertie's face hardened once more.

"No, I can't. You're a man, you don't understand. If she won't apologize, either she must go or I shall."

"I can't lose you, Gertie. What should I do without you?"

"I guess you know me well enough by now. When I say a thing, I do it."

"Eddie!" [Pg 150]

Nora had buried her face in her hands. He looked at her a moment without speaking.

"She's my wife. After all, if it weren't for her I should be hiring out now at forty dollars a month."

Nora lifted her face. For a long moment, brother and sister exchange a sad regard.

"Very well," she said huskily, "I'll do what you want."

He made one last appeal:

"You *do* insist on it, Gertie?"

"Of course I do."

"I'll go and call the men." He looked vacantly about the room, searching for his hat.

"Frank Taylor needn't come, need he?" asked Nora timidly.

"Why not?"

"He's going away almost immediately. It can't matter about him, surely."

"Then why are you so particular about it?"

"The others are English——" She knew she had made an unfortunate speech the moment the words had left her lips and hastened to modify it. "He'll like to see me humiliated. He looks upon women as dirt. He's—— Oh, I don't know, but not before him!"

"It'll do you a world of good to be taken down a peg or two, my lady."

"Oh, how heartless, how cruel!"

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"Go on, Ed. I want to get on with my work."

"Why do you humiliate me like this?" asked Nora after the door had closed on her brother. Gertie had seated herself, very erect and judicial, in one of the rocking chairs.

"You came here and thought you knew everything, I guess. But you didn't know who you'd got to deal with."

"I was a stranger and homeless. If you'd had any kindness, you wouldn't have treated me so. I *wanted* to be fond of you."

"You," scoffed Gertie. "You despised me before you ever saw me."

Nora made a despairing gesture. Even now the men might be on the way, but she had a more unselfish motive for wishing to placate Gertie. Anything rather than bring that look of pain she had seen for the first time that day into her brother's eyes. She staked everything on one last appeal.

"Oh, Gertie, can't we be friends? Can't we let bygones be bygones and start afresh? We both love Eddie—Ed I mean. He's your husband and he's the only relation I have in the world. Won't you let me be a *real* sister to you?"

"It's rather late to say all that now."

"But it's not too late, is it?" Nora went on eagerly. "I don't know what I do that irritates you so. I can see how competent you are, and I admire you so much. I know how splendid you've been with Eddie. How you've stuck to him through thick and thin. You've done everything for him."

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Gertie struck her hands violently together and sprang from her chair.

"Oh, don't go on patronizing me. I shall go crazy!"

"Patronizing you?"

"You talk to me as if I were a naughty child. You might be a school teacher." Nora wrung her hands. "It seems perfectly hopeless!"

"Even when you're begging my pardon," Gertie went on, "you put on airs. You ask me to forgive you as if you was doing *me* a favor!"

"I must have a most unfortunate manner." Nora laughed hysterically.

"Don't you dare laugh at me," said Gertie furiously.

"Don't make yourself ridiculous, then."

"Did you think I would ever forget what you wrote to Ed before I married him?"

"What I wrote? I don't know what you mean."

"Oh, don't you? You told him it would be a disgrace if he married me. He was a gentleman and I —— Oh, you spread yourself out!"

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"And he showed you that letter," said Nora slowly. "Now I understand," she added to herself. "Still," she went on, looking Gertie directly in the face, "I had a perfect right to try and prevent the marriage before it took place. But after it happened, I only wanted to make the best of it. If you had *this* grudge against me, why did you let me come here!"

"Oh," said Gertie moodily, "Ed wanted it, and it was lonely enough sometimes with the men away all day and no one to say a word to. But I can't bear it," she almost screamed, "when Ed talks to you about the old country and all the people I don't know anything about!"

"Then you *are* jealous?"

"It's my house and I'm mistress here. I won't be put upon. What did you want to come here for, upsetting everybody? Till you came, I never had a word with Ed. Oh, I hate you, I hate you!" she finished in a sort of ecstasy.

"Gertie!"

"You've given me my chance," said Gertie with set teeth; "I'm going to take it. I'm going to take you down a peg or two, young woman."

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"You're doing all you can to drive me away from here."

"You don't think it's any very wonderful thing to have you, do you? You talk of getting a job," she went on scornfully. "You! You couldn't get one. I know something about that, my girl. You! What can you do? Nothing."

Suddenly, from outside, they heard Frank Taylor's laugh. Nora winced as if she had been struck. Gertie's face was distorted with an evil smile. She seated herself once more in the rocking chair and folded her arms across her heaving breast.

"Here they come: now take your punishment," she said harshly.

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CHAPTER X

Nora could never after think of what followed with any feeling of reality so far as her personal participation in the scene was concerned. It was like watching a play in which one is interested, without being in any degree emotionally stirred.

She saw Gertie, erect and stern in her big chair; she saw herself, standing behind the ironing-board, as if at a Bar of Justice, her hands resting loosely upon it; and she saw the door open to admit her brother, followed by Taylor and Trotter; noted that the former had discarded the familiar overalls and was wearing a sort of pea-jacket with a fur collar, and that her brother's face was once more sad and a little stern.

She had been obliged to press her handkerchief to her mouth to hide the crooked smile that she thought: '*he* is the executioner,' had brought to her lips.

Then the figures which were Gertie and her brother had exchanged some words.

"Where's Hornby?"

"He's just coming."

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"Do they know what they're here for!"

"No, I didn't tell them."

Then the figure which was Reggie had come in with some laughing remark about being torn away from his work, but, stopping so suddenly in the midst of his laughter at the sight of Gertie's face that it was comical; once more she had had to press her handkerchief to her lips.

And all the time she knew that this Nora whom she seemed to be watching had flushed a cruel red clear to her temples and that a funny little pulse was beating,—oh, so fast, so fast!—way up by her cheek-bone. It couldn't have been her heart. Her heart had never gone as fast as that.

Then she had heard Gertie say: "Nora insulted me a while ago before all of you and I guess she wants to apologize."

And then Frank had said: "If you told me it was that, Ed, you wanted me to come here for, I reckon I'd have told you to go to hell."

"Why?"

It must have been she who had asked the question, although she was not conscious that her lips had moved and the voice did not seem like her own. Her own voice was rather deep. This voice was curiously thin and high.

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"I've got other things to do besides bothering my head about women's quarrels."

"Oh, I beg your pardon," still in the same high tone. "I thought it might be some kindly feeling in you."

"Go on, Nora, we're waiting," came the voice from the big chair.

Sour-dough! That's what those coats, such as Frank had on, were called. She had been wondering all the time what the name was. It was only the other day that Gertie had used the word in saying that she wished Eddie—no, Ed—could afford a new one. What a ridiculous name for a garment.

"I'm sorry I was rude to you, Gertie. I apologize to you for what I said."

"If there's nothing more to be said, we'd better go back to our work."

While her brother was speaking to his wife, Frank had taken a step forward. Somehow, the smile on his face had lost all of its ordinary mockery.

"You didn't find that very easy to say, I reckon."

"I'm quite satisfied." And then Gertie had dared to add: "Let this be a lesson to you, my girl!"

That was the last straw. The men had turned to go. In a flash she had made up her mind. Her

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brother's house was no longer possible. Gertie had, in a moment of passion, confessed that she hated her; had always hated her in her secret heart ever since she had read that protesting letter. What daily humiliations would she not have to endure now that she had matched her strength against Gertie and lost! It meant one long crucifixion of all pride and self-respect. No, it was not to be borne!

There was one avenue of escape open, and only one. *He* had said that he was willing to offer a home to a woman who was willing to assume her share of the burden of making one. It was even possible that he would be both kind and considerate, no matter how many mistakes she made at first, to a woman who tried to learn. Of one thing she was certain, he would know how to see that his wife was treated with respect by all the world. For the moment, her bleeding pride cried to her that that was the only thing in life that was absolutely necessary. Nothing else mattered.

"Frank, will you wait a minute?"

"Sure. What can I do for you?"

"I've understood that I'm not wanted here. I'm in the way. You said just now you wanted a woman to cook and bake for you, wash and mend your clothes, and keep your shack clean and tidy. Will I do?"

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"Sure."

"Nora!" Her brother was shaking her by the shoulder.

"I'm afraid you'll have to marry me."

"I guess it *would* be more respectable."

"Nora, you can't mean it: you're in a temper! See here, Frank, you mustn't pay any attention to her."

"Shameless, that's what I call it." That was Gertie.

"He wants a woman to look after him. He practically proposed to me half an hour ago—didn't you?"

"Practically."

"Nora! You've been like cat and dog with Frank ever since you came. My dear, you don't know what you're in for."

"If he's willing to risk it, I am."

"It ain't an easy life you're coming to. This farm is a palace compared with my shack."

"I'm not wanted here and you say you want me. If you'll take me, I'll come."

For what seemed an interminable moment, he had looked at her with more gravity than she had ever seen in his face.

"I'll take you, all right. When will you be ready? Will an hour do for you?"

"An hour! You're in a great hurry." She had had a funny sensation that her knees were giving way. She had never fainted in her life. Was she going to faint now before them all? Before Gertie? Never! Somehow she must get out of the room and be alone a minute.

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"Why, yes. Then we can catch the three-thirty into Winnipeg. You can go to the Y. W. C. A. for the night and we'll be buckled up in the morning. You meant it, didn't you? You weren't just saying it as a bluff?"

"I shall be ready in an hour."

She had pushed Eddie gently aside and, without a glance at anyone had walked steadily from the room.

Once seated on the side of the bed in the room that had been hers, she had been seized with a chill so violent that her teeth had chattered in her head. To prevent anyone who might follow her from hearing them,—and it was probable that her brother might come for a final remonstrance; it was even conceivable that Gertie, herself, might be sorry for what she had done; but no, it was she who had said she was shameless!—she got up and locked her door and then threw herself full length on the little bed and crammed the corner of the pillow into her mouth.

Perhaps she was going to die. She had never really been ill in her life and the violence of the chill frightened her. In her present overwrought state, the thought of death was not disquieting. But supposing she was only going to be very ill, with some long and tedious illness that would make her a care and a burden for weeks? She recalled the unremitting care which she had had to give Miss Wickham, and pictured Gertie's grudging ministrations at her sick-bed. Anything rather than that! She must manage to get to Winnipeg. Once away from the house, nothing mattered.

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But after a few moments the violence of the chill, which was of course purely nervous in its origin, subsided perceptibly. Nora rose and began to busy herself with her packing. Fortunately her wardrobe was small. She had no idea how long she had been lying on the bed.

She had just folded the last garment and was about to close the lid of her trunk, when there came a knock at the door.

"Who is it?"

"It's me," said Frank's voice. "The team is at the door. Are you ready?"

For reply, Nora threw open the door and pointed to her box.

"I have only to put on my hat. Will you be good enough to fasten that for me? Here is the key."

While he knelt on the floor, locking and strapping it, she gave a careful look at herself in the mirror, while putting on her hat. She congratulated herself that she had not been crying. Aside from the fact that she looked pale and tired, there was nothing in her face to suggest that she had had a crisis of the nerves: certainly no look of defeat for Gertie to gloat over. Would they all be there to witness her retreat? Well, let them: no one could say that she had not gone out with flying colors. She turned, with a smile to meet Frank's gaze.

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"That's right," he said approvingly. "You look fine. Say," he added, "I'm afraid I'll have to have Reggie up to give me a lift with this trunk of yours. I don't know what you can have in it unless it's a stove, and we've got one at home already. It'll be all right once I get it on my back."

He had taken just the right tone. His easy reference to 'home' and to their common possession of even so humble a piece of furniture as a stove, as if they were an old married couple returning home after paying a visit, had a restorative effect on nerves still a little jangly. That was the only way to look at it: In a thoroughly commonplace manner. As he had said himself, it was a business undertaking. She gave a perfectly natural little laugh.

"No, I haven't a stove; only a few books. I didn't realize how heavy they were. I'm sorry."

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"I'm not," he said heartily. "You can read to me evenings. I guess a little more book-learning'll polish me up a bit and I'll be right glad of the chance. You're not afraid to stand at the horses' heads, are you, while Reg runs up here?"

"No, of course not."

She could hear Gertie in the pantry as she crossed the living-room. She was grateful to her for not coming out to make any show of leave-taking. Having sent Reggie on his errand, she stood stroking the horses' soft noses while waiting for the men to return. Just as they reached the door, Eddie came slowly over to her from the barn. His face was haggard. He looked older than she had ever seen him.

"Nora," he said in a low tone, "I beg you, before it is too late——"

"Please, dear," she whispered, her hand on his, "you only make it harder."

"I'll write, Eddie, oh, in a few days, and tell you all about my new home," she called gayly, as Frank, having disposed of her trunk in the back of the wagon, lifted her in. Her brother turned without a word to the others and went into the house.

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As she felt herself for the second time in those arms, the reaction came.

"Eddie, Eddie!"

But, strangled by sobs, her voice hardly carried to the man on the seat in front of her.

As he sprang in, Frank gave the horses a flick with the whip. The afternoon air was keen and the high-spirited team needed no further urging. They swung out of the farm gate at a pace that made Reggie cling to the seat.

When he had them once more in hand, Taylor turned his head slightly.

"All right back there?" he called, without looking at her.

She managed a "Yes."

She had only just recovered her self-control as they drove into Winnipeg. As they drew up in front of the principal hotel, Taylor turned the reins once more over to Reggie, and, vaulting lightly from his seat, held out his hand and helped her to alight.

"You'd better go into the ladies' parlor for a minute or two. I'm feeling generous and am going to blow Reg to a parting drink. I'll come after you in a minute and take you to the Y. W. C. A."

"Very well."

"Here," he called, as she turned toward the door marked Ladies' Entrance, "aren't you going to say good-by to Reg?"

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For a moment she almost lost her self-control. To say good-by to Reg was the final wrench. She had known him in those immeasurably far-off days at home. It was saying good-by to England. She held out her hand without speaking.

"Good-by, Miss Marsh," he said warmly, "and good luck."

A quarter of an hour later Taylor came to her in the stuffy little parlor of which she was the

solitary tenant. In silence they made their way to the building occupied by the Y. W. C. A.

"You have money?" he asked as they reached the door.

"Plenty, thanks."

"Do you want me to come in with you?"

"It isn't necessary."

"What time shall I come for you to-morrow?"

"At whatever time you choose."

"Shall we say ten, then? Or eleven might be better. I've got to get the license, you know, and look up the parson."

"Very good; at eleven."

"Good night, Nora."

"Good night, Frank."

Nora's first impulse on being shown to a room was to go at once to bed. Mind and body both cried out for rest. But she remembered that she had eaten nothing since noon. She would need all her strength for the morrow. She supposed they would start at once for Taylor's farm after they were married.

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Good God, since the world began had any woman ever trapped herself so completely as she had done! But she must not think of that.

She had not the most remote idea where the farm was. All she remembered to have heard was that it was west of Winnipeg, miles farther than her brother's. One couldn't drive to it, it was necessary to take the train. But whether it was a day's journey or a week's journey, she had never been interested enough to ask. After all, what could it possibly matter where it was; the farther away from everybody and everything she had ever known, the better.

The sound of a gong in the hall below recalled her thoughts to the matter of supper. She went down to a bare little dining-room, only partly filled, and accepted silently the various dishes set before her all at one time. She had never seen a dinner—or supper, they probably called it—served in such a haphazard fashion.

Even at Gertie's—she smiled wanly at the thought that since the morning she no longer thought of it as her brother's, but as Gertie's—while such a thing as a dinner served in courses had probably never been heard of by anyone but Reggie, her brother and herself, the few simple, well-cooked dishes bore some relation to each other, and the supply was always ample. Gertie was justly proud of her reputation as a good provider.

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But here there was a sort of mockery of abundance. Dabs of vegetables, sauces, preserves, meats, both hot and cold, in cheap little china dishes fairly elbowed each other for room. It would have dulled a keener appetite than poor Nora's.

Having managed to swallow a cup of weak tea and a piece of heavy bread, she went once more to her room and sat down by the window which looked out on what she took to be one of the principal streets of the town. Tired as she still was, she felt not the slightest inclination for sleep. The thought of lying there, wakeful, in the dark, filled her with terror. For the first time in her life, Nora was frightened. She pressed her face against the window to watch the infrequent passers-by. Surely none of them could be as unhappy as she. Like a hideous refrain, over and over in her head rang the words:

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"Trapped, trapped, trapped, by your own mad temper, trapped!"

At length, unable to bear it any longer, the now empty street offering no distraction, she undressed and went to bed, hoping for relief in sleep. But sleep would not be wooed. She tossed from side to side, always hearing those maddening words:

"Trapped, trapped, trapped, by your own mad temper, trapped!"

All sorts of impractical schemes tormented her feverish brain. She would appeal to the manager of the place. She was a woman. She would understand. She would do any work, anything, for her bare keep. Take care of the rooms, wait on table, anything. Then the thought came to her of how Gertie would gloat to hear—and she would be sure to do so, things always got out—that she was now doing *her* old work. No, she could not bear that.

Perhaps, if she started out very early, she could get a position in some shop. There must be plenty of shops in a place the size of Winnipeg. But what would she say when asked what experience she had had? No; that, too, seemed hopeless.

As a last resort, she thought of throwing herself on Taylor's mercy. She would explain to him that she had been mad with anger; that she hadn't in the least realized what she was doing; that her only thought had been to defy Gertie in the hour of her triumph. Surely no man since the days of the cave-men would prize an unwilling wife. She would humbly confess that she had used him and beg his pardon, if necessary, on her knees.

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But what if he refused to release her from her promise? And what if he did release her? What then? There still remained the unsolvable problem of what she was to do. Her brother had told her that positions in Winnipeg during the winter months were impossible to get. Gertie had taunted her with the same fact. She had less than six dollars in the world. After she had paid her bill she would have little more than four. It was hopeless.

"Trapped, trapped, trapped, by your own mad temper, trapped!"

And then more plans; each one kindling fresh hope in her heart only to have it extinguished, like a torch thrown into a pool, when they proved, on analysis, each to be more impracticable than its predecessor. And then, the refrain. And then, more plans.

It was a haggard and weary-looking bride that presented herself to the expectant bridegroom the next morning. The great circles under her eyes told the story of a sleepless night. But nothing in Taylor's manner betrayed that he noticed that she was looking otherwise than as usual.

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While she was dressing, Nora had come to a final decision. Quite calmly and unemotionally she would explain the situation to him. She would point out the impossibility, the absurdity even, of keeping an agreement entered into, by one of the parties at least, in hot blood, and thoroughly repented of, on later and saner reflection. In the remote event of this unanswerable argument failing to move him, she would appeal to his honor as a man not to hold her, a woman, to so unfair a bargain. She had even prepared the well-balanced sentences with which she would begin.

But as she stood with her cold hand in his warm one, he forestalled her by exhibiting, not without a certain boyish pride, the marriage license and the plain gold band which was to bind her. If these familiar and rather commonplace objects had been endowed with some evil magic, they could not have deprived her of the power of speech more effectively.

Without a protest, she permitted herself to be led to the waiting carriage, provided in honor of the occasion. It seemed but a moment later that she found herself being warmly embraced by a motherly looking woman, who, it transpired, was the wife of the clergyman who had just performed the ceremony.

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From the parsonage they drove directly to the station.

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CHAPTER XI

The journey had seemed endless: it was already nightfall when they arrived at the town of Prentice, where they were to get off and drive some twelve miles farther to her new home. And yet, endless and unspeakably wearying as it was, her heart contracted to find that it was at an end.

She realized now how comfortable, even luxurious, her trip across the Continent had been by comparison. Then, she had traveled in a Pullman. This, she learned, was called a day-coach. Her husband did everything in his power to mitigate the rigors of the trip. He made a pillow for her with his coat, bought her fruits, candies and magazines from the train-boy, until she protested. Best of all, he divined and respected her disinclination for conversation. At intervals during the day he left her to go into the smoking-car to enjoy his pipe.

The view from the window was, on the whole, rather monotonous. But it would have had to be varied indeed to match the mental pictures that Nora's flying thoughts conjured up for her.

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The dead level of her life at Tunbridge Wells had been a curious preparation for the violent changes of the last few months. How often when walking in the old-world garden with Miss Wickham she had had the sensation of stifling, oppressed by those vine-covered walls, and inwardly had likened herself to a prisoner. There were no walls now to confine her. Clear away to the sunset it was open. And yet she was more of a prisoner than she had ever been. And now she wore a fetter, albeit of gold, on her hand.

It had been her habit to think of herself with pity as friendless in those days; forgetful of the good doctor and his wife, Agnes Pringle and even Mr. Wynne, not to speak of her humbler friends, the gardener's wife and children, and the good Kate. Well, she was being punished for it now. It would be hard, indeed, to imagine a more friendless condition than hers. Rushing onward, farther and farther into the wilderness to make for herself a home miles from any human habitation; no woman, in all probability, to turn to in case of need. And, crowning loneliness, having ever at her side a man with whom she had been on terms of open enmity up to a few short hours before!

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From time to time she stole furtive glances at him as he sat at her side; and once, when he had put his head back against the seat and pulled his broad-brimmed hat over his eyes and was seemingly asleep, she turned her head and gave him a long appraising look.

How big and strong and self-reliant he was. He was just the type of man who would go out into the wilderness and conquer it. And, although she had scoffed at his statement when he made it, she knew that he had brains. Yes, although his lack of education and refinement must often touch her on the raw, he was a man whom any woman could respect in her heart.

And when they clashed, as clash they must until she had tamed him a little, she would need every weapon in her woman's arsenal to save her from utter rout; she realized that. But then, these big, rough men were always the first to respond to any appeal to their natural chivalry. If she found herself being worsted, there was always that to fall back upon.

If from some other world Miss Wickham could see her, how she must be smiling! Nora, herself, smiled at the thought. And at the thought of Agnes Pringle's outraged astonishment if she were to meet her husband now, before she had toned him down, as she meant to do. She recalled the chill finality of her friend's tone when in animadverting on the doctor's unfortunate assistant she had said: "But, my dear, of course it would be impossible to marry anyone who wasn't a gentleman."

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If by some Arabian Night's trick she could suddenly transport herself and the sleeping Frank to Miss Pringle's side, she felt that that excellent lady's astonishment at seeing her descend from the Magic Carpet would be as nothing in comparison to her astonishment in being presented to Nora's husband.

Her mind had grown accustomed already to thinking of him as her husband; not, as yet, to thinking of herself as his wife.

At supper time they went into a car ahead, where Frank ate with his accustomed appetite and Nora pecked daintily at the cold chicken.

And now they were at Prentice. For some minutes before arriving, Frank, who had asked her a few moments before to change places with him, had been looking anxiously out of the window, his nose flattened against the glass. As they drew up to the station platform, he gave a shout.

"Good! There's old man Sharp. Luckily I remembered it was the day he generally drove over and wired him."

"What for?"

"So that he could drive us home. He's a near neighbor; lives only about a mile beyond us. He's married, too. So you won't be entirely without a woman to complain to about me."

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"I should hardly be likely to do that," said Nora stiffly.

"Bless your heart! I know you wouldn't: you're not that sort."

"I hope she's not much like Gertie."

"Gosh, no! A different breed of cats altogether."

"Well, that's something to be thankful for."

"This is Mr. Sharp; Sid, shake hands with Mrs. Frank Taylor."

It was the first time that she had heard herself called by her new name. It came as a distinct and not altogether pleasant shock.

Once again her husband lifted her in his strong arms to the back seat of the rough-looking wagon and saw to it that she was warmly wrapped up, for, although there was little or no snow to be seen at Prentice, the night air was sharply chill. She moved over a little to make room for him at her side; but without appearing to notice her action, he jumped lightly onto the front seat beside his friend.

"Let 'em go, Sid. Everything all comfortable?" he asked, turning to Nora.

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"Quite, thanks."

Throughout the long cold drive, they exchanged no further word. Frank and Sid seemed to have much to say to each other about their respective farms. Nora gathered from what she could hear that Sharp had played the part of a good neighbor, during her husband's enforced absence, in having a general oversight of his house.

"You'll find the fence's down in quite a few places. I allowed to fix it myself when I had the spare time, but when I heard that you was comin' back so soon, I just naturally let her go."

"Sure, that was right. It'll give me something to do right at home. I don't want to leave Mrs. Taylor too much alone until she gets a little used to it. She's always been used to a lot of company," Nora heard him say.

She smiled to herself in the darkness and felt a little warm feeling of gratitude. She was right in her estimate. This man would be tractable enough, after all. His attitude toward women, which, had formerly so enraged her, was only on the surface. An affectation assumed to annoy her when they were always quarreling. How foolish she had been not to read him more accurately. For the first time, she felt a little return of self-confidence. She would bring this hazardous experiment to a successful conclusion, after all. It was really failure that she had most feared.

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But her heart sank within her once more when at last they drew up in front of a long, low cabin built of logs. Mr. Sharp had not overstated the dilapidated state of the fence. It sagged in half a dozen places and one hinge of the gate was broken. Altogether it was as dreary a picture as one could well imagine. The little cabin had the utterly forlorn look of a house that has long been

unoccupied.

"Woa there! Stand still, can't you?" said Sharp, tugging at the reins.

"A tidy pull, that last bit," said Frank. "Trail's very bad."

"Stand still, you brute! Wait a minute, Mrs. Taylor."

"I guess she wants to get home."

Taylor vaulted lightly from his seat and, without waiting to help Nora, ran up the path to the house. As she stood up, trying to disentangle herself from the heavy lap-robe, she could hear a key turn noisily in a lock. With a jerk, he threw the door wide open.

"Wait a bit and I'll light the lamp, if I can find where the hell it's got to," he called. "This shack's about two foot by three, and I'm blamed if I can ever find a darned thing!"

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Nora smiled to herself in the darkness.

She got down unassisted this time. Under the bright and starry sky she could see a long stretch of prairie, fading away, without a break into the darkness. A long way off she thought she could distinguish a light, but she could not be certain.

"I'll give you a hand with the trunk," called Sharp, laboriously climbing out of the wagon. "Woa there," as the mare pawed restlessly on the ground.

"I'll come and help you if you'll wait a bit. Come on in, Nora."

Nora hunted round among the numerous parcels underneath the seat until she found a meshed bag containing some bread, butter and other necessaries they had bought on the way to the station. Then she walked slowly up the path to her home.

She had the feeling that she was still a free agent as long as she remained outside. Once her foot had crossed the threshold—! It was like getting into an ice-cold bath. She dreaded the plunge. However, it must be taken. He was standing stock-still in the middle of the room as she reached the door, his heavy brows drawn together.

"I'm quite stiff after that long drive."

The moment the words were out of her mouth she wished to recall them. This was no way to begin. It was actually as if she had been trying to excuse herself for not coming more quickly when she was called. His whole attitude of frowning impatience showed that he had expected her to come at the sound of his voice. His face cleared at once.

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"Are you cold?" he asked with a certain anxiety.

"No, not a bit; I was so well wrapped up."

"Well, it's freezing pretty hard. But, you see, it's your first winter and you won't feel the cold like we do?"

"How odd," said Nora. "I'll just bring some of the things in." She had an odd feeling that she didn't want to be alone with him just now, and said the first thing that entered her head.

"Don't touch the trunk, it's too heavy for you."

"Oh, I'm as strong as a horse."

"Don't *touch* it."

"I won't," she laughed.

He brushed by her and went on out to the rig, returning almost instantly with an arm full of parcels.

"We could all do with a cup of tea. Just have a look at the stove. It won't take two shakes to light a fire."

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"It seems hardly worth while; it's so late."

"Oh, light the fire, my girl, and don't talk about it," he said good-humoredly.

On her knees before the stove, with her face as flushed as if it were already glowing, Nora raked away at the ashes. Through the open doorway she could see her husband and Mr. Sharp unfasten the trunk from the back of the wagon and start with it toward the house.

"This trunk of yours ain't what you might call light, Mrs. Taylor," said Sharp good-naturedly as he stepped over the threshold.

"You see it holds everything I own in the world," said Nora lightly.

"I guess it don't do that," laughed her husband. "Since this morning, you own a half share in a hundred and sixty acres of as good land as there is in the Province of Manitoba, and a mighty good shack, if I did build it all myself."

"To say nothing of a husband," retorted Nora.

"Where do you want it put?" asked Sharp.

"It 'ud better go in the next room right away. We don't want to be falling over it."

As they were carrying it in, Nora, with a rather helpless air, carried a couple of logs and a handful of newspapers over from the pile in the corner.

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"Here, you'll never be able to light a fire with logs like that. Where's that darned ax? I'll chop 'em for you. I guess you'll have plenty to do getting the shack tidy."

After a little searching, he found the ax back of the wood-pile and set himself to splitting the logs. In the meantime, Sharp, who had made another pilgrimage to the rig, returned carrying his friend's grip and gun.

"Now, that's real good of you, Sid."

"Get any shooting down at Dyer, Frank?"

"There was a rare lot of prairie chickens round, but I didn't get out more than a couple of days."

"Well," said Sharp, taking off his fur cap and scratching his head, "I guess I'll be gettin' back home now."

"Oh, stay and have a cup of tea, won't you?"

"Do," said Nora, seconding the invitation.

She had taken quite a fancy to this rough, good-natured man. In spite of his straggly beard and unkempt appearance, there was a vague suggestion of the soldier about him. Besides, she had a vague feeling that she would like to postpone his departure as long as she could.

"I hope you won't be offended if I say that I would take you for English," she said, smiling brightly on him.

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"You're right, ma'am, I am English."

"And a soldier?"

"I was a non-commissioned officer in a regiment back home, ma'am," he said, greatly pleased. "But why should I be offended?"

Nora and her husband exchanged glances.

"It's this way," Frank laughed. "Gertie, that's Nora's brother's wife—down where I've been working—ain't very partial to the English. I guess my wife's been rather fed up with her talk."

"Oh, I see. But, thank you all the same, and you, too, Mrs. Taylor, I don't think I'll stay. It's getting late and the mare'll get cold."

"Put her in the shed."

"No, I think I'll be toddling. My missus says I was to give you her compliments, Mrs. Taylor, and she'll be round to-morrow to see if there's anything you want."

"That's very kind of her. Thank you very much."

"Sid lives where you can see that light just about a mile from here, Nora," explained Frank. "Mrs. Sharp'll be able to help you a lot at first."

"Oh, well, we've been here for thirteen years and we know the ways of the country by now," deprecated Mr. Sharp.

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"Nora's about as green as a new dollar bill, I guess."

"I fear that's too true," Nora admitted smilingly.

"There's a lot you can't be expected to know at first," protested their neighbor. "I'll say good night, then, and good luck."

"Well, good night then, Sid, if you *won't* stay. And say, it was real good of you to come and fetch us in the rig."

"Oh, that's all right. Good night to you, Mrs. Taylor."

"Goodnight."

Pulling his cap well down over his ears, Mr. Sharp took his departure. In the silence they could hear him drive away.

Nora went over to the stove again and made a pretense of examining the fire, conscious all the time that her husband was looking at her intently.

"I guess it must seem funny to you to hear him call you Mrs. Taylor, eh?"

"No. He isn't the first person to do so. The clergyman's wife did, you remember."

"That's so. How are you getting on with that fire?"

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"All right."

"I guess I'll get some water; I'll only be a few minutes."

He took a pail and went out. Nora could hear him pumping down in the yard. Getting up hurriedly from her knees before the stove, she took up the lamp and held it high above her head.

This untidy, comfortless, bedraggled room was now hers, her home! She would not have believed that any human habitation could be so hopelessly dreary.

The walls were not even sealed, as at the brother's. Tacked, here and there, against the logs were pictures cut from illustrated papers, unframed, just as they were. The furniture, with the exception of the inevitable rocking-chair, worn and shabby from hard use, had apparently been made by Frank, himself, out of old packing boxes. The table had been fashioned by the same hand out of similar materials. On a shelf over the rusty stove stood a few battered pots and pans; evidently the entire kitchen equipment. There were two doors, one by which she had entered; the other, leading supposedly into another room. The one window was small and low. Even in this light she could see that a spider had spun a huge web across it. In the dark corners of the room all sorts of objects seemed to be piled without any pretense of order.

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She lowered the lamp and listened. Yes, she could still hear the pump. With a furtive, guilty air she hurried to complete her examination before he should surprise her.

One of the corners contained a battered suitcase and a nondescript pile of old clothes, the other was piled high with yellowing copies of what she saw was the Winnipeg *Free Press* and a few old magazines.

"The library!" she said bitterly, and was surprised to find that she had spoken aloud. Insane people did that, she had heard. Was she—?

She ran over to a shelf that had escaped her notice, and the ill-fitting lamp chimney rattled as she moved. It was stacked high with the same empty syrup cans that at Gertie's did the duty of flower-pots. But these held flour, now quite mouldy, and various other staple supplies all spoiled and useless. She started to say "the larder," but, remembering in time, put her hand over her lips that she might only think it.

And now she had come to that other door. She must see what was there.

"Having a look at the shack?"

She gave a stifled scream and for a moment turned so pale that he hastily set down his pail and went over to her.

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"I guess you're all tuckered out," he said kindly. "No wonder. You've had quite a little excitement the last day or two."

With a tremendous effort, Nora recovered her self-control. She walked steadily over to one of the packing-box stools and sat down.

"It was silly of me, but you don't know how you startled me. Don't think I usually have nerves, but—but the place was strange last night and I didn't sleep very well."

"Do you mind if I open the door a moment?" she asked after a short pause. "It isn't really cold and it looks so beautiful outside. One can't see anything out of the window, you know, it's so cobwebby. I must clean it—to-morrow."

Try as she would, her voice faltered on the last word.

She threw open the door and stood a moment looking out into the bright Canadian night brilliant with stars. It was all so big, so open, so free—and so lonely! You could fairly hear the stillness. But she must not think of that. Ah, there was the light that she had been told was the Sharp's farm. Somehow, it brought her comfort. But even as she watched, the light went out. She came in and closed the door.

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CHAPTER XII

He was sitting on one of the stools, pipe in mouth, reading a newspaper he had already read in the train.

"Well, what do you think of the shack?"

"I don't know."

"I built it with my own hands. Every one of them logs was a tree I cut down myself. You wait till morning and I'll show you how they're joined together, at the corners. There's some neat work there, my girl, I guess."

"Yes? Oh, I was forgetting; here's the kettle." She brought it over to him from the shelf. He filled the kettle carefully from the pail while she stood and watched him. She took it from his hand and

set it on the stove to boil.

"You'll find some tea in one of them cans on the shelf; leastways, there was some there when I come away. I reckon you're hungry."

"I don't think I am, very. I ate a very good supper on the train, you know."

"I'm glad you call that a good supper. I guess I could wrap up the amount you ate in a postage stamp."

"Well," she said with a smile, "you may be glad to learn that I haven't a very large appetite."

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"I have, then. Where's the loaf we got in Winnipeg this afternoon?"

"I'll get it."

"And the butter. You'll bake to-morrow, I reckon."

"You're a brave man—unless you've forgotten my first attempt at Eddie's," she said with a laugh as she took the loaf and butter from the bag.

For some reason her mood had completely changed. All her confidence in being perfectly able to take care of herself had returned. She had been frightened, badly frightened a moment ago at nothing. Nerves, nothing more. Nerves were queer things. It was because she hadn't slept last night. She was such a good sleeper naturally that a wakeful night affected her more than it did most people. The cool night air had completely restored her.

She hunted about until she found a knife, and with the loaf in one hand and the knife poised in the air asked:

"Shall I cut you some?"

"Yep."

"Please."

"Please what?"

"Yep, please," she said with a gay smile.

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"Oh!" he growled.

Still smiling, she cut several slices of bread and buttered them. Going to the shelf, she found the teapot and shook some tea into it from one of the cans, measuring it carefully with her eye. His momentary ill humor, caused by her correcting him, vanished as he watched her.

"I guess it's about time you took your hat and coat off," he said with a chuckle.

As a matter of fact, she was not conscious that they were still on. Without a word, she took them off and, having given her coat a little shake and a pat, looked about her for a place to put them. She ended finally by putting them both on the kitchen chair.

"You ain't terribly talkative for a woman, are you, my girl?"

"I haven't anything to say for the moment," said Nora.

"Well, I guess it's better to have a wife as talks too little than a wife as talks too much."

"I suppose absolute perfection is rare—in women, poor wretches," she said in the old ironic tone she had always used toward him while he was her brother's hired man.

"What's that?" he said sharply.

"I was only amusing myself with a reflection."

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He checked an angry retort, and striding over to a nail in the wall, took off his coat and hung it up. Somehow, he looked larger than ever in his gray sweater. A sense of comfort and unaccustomed well-being restored him to good humor. Throwing himself into the rocker, he stretched out his long legs luxuriantly.

"I guess there's no place like home. You get a bit fed up with hiring out. Ed was O. K., I reckon, but it ain't like being your own boss."

"I should think it wouldn't be," said Nora quietly.

"Where does that door go?" she asked presently.

"That? Oh, into the bedroom. Like to have a look?"

"No."

"No what?" he said quickly.

Nora turned from the shelf where she had been contriving a place to put the things they had brought from the town, and looked at him inquiringly. His face was grave, but a twinkle in his eye betrayed him. She blushed charmingly to the roots of her hair, but her laugh was perfectly frank and good-humored. "I beg your pardon. I was so occupied with arranging my pantry that I forgot

my manners. No, *thank you*."

"One can't be too careful about these important things," he said with rather heavy humor. "When I built this shack," he went on proudly—but the pride was the pride of possession, not of achievement—"I fixed it up so as it would do when I got married. Sid Sharp asked me what in hell I wanted to divide it up in half for, but I guess women like little luxuries like that." [Pg 192]

"Like what?"

"Like having a room to sleep in and a room to live in."

"Here's the bread and butter," said Nora abruptly. "Will you have some syrup?"

"S-u-r-e." He got up out of the rocking chair and pulling one of the stools up to the table, sat down.

"The water ought to be boiling by now; what about milk?"

"That's one of the things you'll have to learn to do without till I can afford to buy a cow."

"I can't drink tea without milk."

"You try. Say, can you milk a cow?"

"I? No."

"Then it's just as well I ain't got one."

Nora laughed. "You *are* a philosopher."

Having filled the teapot with boiling water and set it on the table, she returned to the shelf and began moving the things about in search of something. [Pg 193]

"What you looking for?"

"Is there a candle? I'll just get one or two things out of my box and bring in here."

"Ain't you going to sit down and have a cup of tea?"

"I don't want any, thanks."

"Sit down, my girl."

"Why?"

"Because I tell you to." The command was smilingly given.

"I don't think you'd better tell me to do things." Nora could smile, too.

"Then I ask you. You ain't going to refuse the first favor I've asked you?"

"Certainly not," she said in her most charming manner. Pulling another of the stools up to the table, she sat facing him.

"There."

"Now, pour out my tea for me, will you? I tell you," he said, watching her slim hands moving among the tea things, "it's rum seeing *my* wife sitting down at *my* table and pouring out tea for me."

"Is it pleasant?"

"Sure. Now have some tea yourself, my girl. You'll soon get used to drinking it without milk. And I guess you'll be able to get some to-morrow from Mrs. Sharp." [Pg 194]

Nora noticed that he did not taste his tea until she had poured herself a cup.

"Just take a bit of the bread and butter."

He passed her the plate and she, still smiling brightly, broke off a small half of one of the slices.

"I had a sort of feeling I wanted you and me to have the first meal together in your new home," he said gently.

Then, with a sudden change of manner, he laughed aloud.

"We ain't lost much time, I guess. Why, it's only yesterday you told me not to call you Nora. You did *flare* out at me!"

"That was very silly of me, but I was in a temper."

"And now we're man and wife."

"Yes: married in haste with a vengeance."

"Ain't you a bit scared?"

"I? What of? You?"

Her voice was steady, but the hands in her lap were clenched.

"With Ed miles away, t'other side of Winnipeg, he might just as well be in the old country for all the good he can be to you. You might naturally be a bit scared to find yourself alone with a man you don't know."

"I'm not the nervous sort."

"Good for you!"

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"You *did* give me a fright, though," said Nora, with a laugh, "when I asked you if you'd take me. I suppose it was only about fifteen seconds before you answered, but it seemed like ten minutes. I thought you were going to refuse. How Gertie would have gloated!"

"I was thinking."

"I see. Counting up my good points and balancing them against my bad ones."

"N-o-o-o: I was thinking you wouldn't have asked me like that if you hadn't of despised me."

Nora caught her breath sharply, but her manner lost none of its lightness.

"I don't know what made you think that."

"Well, I don't know how you could have put it more plainly that my name was mud."

"Why didn't you refuse, then?"

"I guess I'm not the nervous sort, either," he remarked dryly over his teacup.

"*And*," Nora reminded him, "women are scarce in Manitoba."

"I've always fancied an English woman," he went on, ignoring her little thrust. "They make the best wives going when they've been licked into shape."

Nora showed her amusement frankly.

"Are you purposing to attempt that operation on me?"

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"Well, you're clever. I guess a hint or two is about all you'll want."

"You embarrass me when you pay me compliments."

"I'll take you round and show you the land to-morrow," he said, tilting back on his stool, to the imminent peril of his equilibrium. "I ain't done all the clearing yet, so there'll be plenty of work for the winter. I want to have a hundred acres to sow next year. And then, if I get a good crop, I've a mind to take another quarter. You can't make it pay really without you've got half a section. And it's a tough proposition when you ain't got capital."

"I had no idea I was marrying a millionaire."

"Never you mind, my girl, you shan't live in a shack long, I promise you. It's the greatest country in the world. We only want three good crops and you shall have a brick house same as you lived in back home."

"I wonder what they're doing in England now."

"Well, I guess they're asleep."

"When I think of England I always think of it at tea time," began Nora, and then stopped short.

A wave of regret caught her throat. In spite of herself, the tears filled her eyes. She looked miserably at the cheap, ugly tea things on the makeshift table before her. Her husband watched her gravely. Presently she went on, more to herself than to him:

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"Miss Wickham had a beautiful old silver teapot, a George Second. She was awfully proud of it. And she was proud of her tea-set; it was old Worcester. And she wouldn't let anyone wash the tea things but——" Again, her voice failed her. "And two or three times a week an old Indian judge came in to tea. And he used to talk to me about the East, the wonderful, beautiful East. He made me long to see it all—I who had never been anywhere. I've always loved history and books of travel more than anything else. There are a lot of them there in my box—that's what makes it so heavy—all about the beautiful places I was going to see later on with the money Miss Wickham promised me——" her glance took in the mean little room in all its unrelieved ugliness. "Oh, why did you make me think of it all?"

She bowed her head on the table for a moment. Taylor laid his hand gently on her arm.

"The past is dead and gone, my girl. We've got the future; it's ours."

She gently disengaged herself from his detaining hand and went over to the little window, looking out with eyes that saw other pictures than the window had to show.

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"One never knows when one's well off, does one? It's madness to think of what's gone forever."

For several minutes there was silence, during which Nora recovered her self-control. Having wiped away her tears, she turned hack to him, smiling bravely. "I beg your pardon. You'll think

me more foolish than I really am. I'm not the crying sort, I assure you. But I don't know, it all——"

"That's all right, I know you're not," he said roughly. "I wish we'd got a good drop of liquor here," he went on with the evident intention of changing the current of her thoughts, "so as we could drink one another's health. But as we *ain't*, you'd better give me a kiss instead."

"I'm not at all fond of kissing," said Nora coolly.

Frank grinned at her, his pipe stuck between his white teeth.

"It ain't, generally speaking, an acquired taste. I guess you must be peculiar."

"It looks like it," she said lightly.

"Come, my girl," he said, getting slowly up from his stool, "you didn't even kiss me after we was married."

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"Isn't a hint enough for you?"—her tone was perfectly friendly. "Why do you insist on my saying everything in so many words? Why make me dot my i's and cross my t's, so to speak?"

"It seems to me it wants a few words to make it plain when a woman refuses to give her husband a kiss."

"Do sit down, there's a good fellow, and I'll tell you one or two things."

"That's terribly kind of you," he said, sinking into the rocker. "Have you any choice of seats?"

"Not now, since you've taken the only one that's tolerably comfortable. I think there's nothing to choose between the others."

"Nothing, I should say."

"I think we'd better fix things up before we go any further," she said, resuming her stool.

"Sure."

"You gave me to understand very plainly that you wanted a wife in order to get a general servant without having to pay her wages. Wages are high, here in Canada."

"That was the way *you* put it."

"Batching isn't very comfortable, you'll confess that?"

"I'll confess that, all right."

"You wanted someone to cook and bake for you, wash, sweep and mend. I offered to come and do all that for you. It never entered my head for an instant that there was any possibility of your expecting anything else of me."

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"Then you're a damned fool, my girl."

He was perfectly good-natured. She would have preferred him to be a little angry. She would know how to cope with that, she thought. But she flared up a little herself.

"D'you mind not saying things like that to me?"

His smile widened. "I guess I'll have to say a good many things like that—or worse—before we've done."

"I asked you to marry me only because I couldn't stay in the shack otherwise."

"You asked me to marry you because you was in the hell of a temper," he retorted. "You were mad clean through. You wanted to get away from Ed's farm right then and there and you didn't care what you did so long as you quit. But you was darned sorry for what you'd done by the time you'd got your trunk packed."

"I don't know that you have any reason for thinking that," she said stiffly.

"I've got sense. Besides, when you opened the door when I went up and knocked, you was as white as a sheet. You'd have given anything you had to say you'd changed your mind, but your damned pride wouldn't let you."

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"I wouldn't have stayed longer in that house for anything in the world," said Nora with passion.

"There you are; that's just what I have been telling you," he said, nodding his head. "And this morning, when I came for you at the Y. W. C. A., you wanted bad to say you wouldn't marry me. When you shook hands with me your hand was like ice. You tried to speak the words, but they wouldn't come."

"After all, one isn't married every day of one's life, is one? I admit I was nervous for the moment."

"If I hadn't shown you the license and the ring, I guess you wouldn't have done it. You hadn't the nerve to back out of it then."

"I hadn't slept a wink all night. I kept on turning it over in my mind. I *was* frightened at what I'd done. I didn't know a soul in Winnipeg. I hadn't anywhere to go. I had four dollars in my pocket. I

had to go on with it."

"Well, you took pretty good stock of me in the train on the way here, I guess," he laughed, pacing up and down the room.

"What makes you think so?" asked Nora, who had recovered her coolness.

"Well, I felt you was looking at me a good deal while I was asleep," he jeered. "It wasn't hard to see that you was turning me over in your mind. What conclusion did you come to?" [Pg 202]

Nora evaded the question for the moment.

"You see, I lived all these years with an old lady. I know very little about men."

"I guessed that."

"I came to the conclusion that you were a decent fellow and I thought you would be kind to me."

"Bouquets are just flying round! Have you got anything more to say to me?" he asked, seating himself once more in his chair.

"No, I think not."

"Then just get me my tobacco pouch, will you? I guess you'll find it in the pocket of my coat."

With narrowed eyes, he watched her first hesitate, and then bring it to him.

"Here you are." Her tone was crisp.

"I thought you was going to tell me I could darned well get it myself," he laughed.

"I don't very much like to be ordered about," she said smoothly; "I didn't realize it was one of your bad habits."

"You never paid much attention to me or my habits till to-day, I reckon."

"I was always polite to you."

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"Oh, very! But I was the hired man, and you'd never let me forget it. You thought yourself a darned sight better than me, because you could play the piano and speak French. But we ain't got a piano and there ain't anyone as speaks French nearer than Winnipeg."

"I don't just see what you're driving at."

"Parlor tricks ain't much good on the prairie. They're like dollar bills up in Hudson Bay country. Tobacco's the only thing you can trade with an Esquimaux. You can't cook very well, you don't know how to milk a cow; why, you can't even harness a horse."

"Are you regretting your bargain already?"

"No," he said, going over to the shelf in search of the matches, "I guess I can teach you. But if I was you"—he paused, the lighted match in his fingers, to look at her—"I wouldn't put on any airs. We'll get on O. K., I guess, when we've shaken down."

"You'll find I am perfectly capable of taking care of myself," she said with emphasis, speaking each word slowly. She returned his steady gaze and felt a thrill of victory when he looked away.

"When two people live in a shack," he went on as if she had not spoken, "there's got to be a deal of give and take on both sides. As long as you do what I tell you you'll be all right."

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A sort of an angry smile crossed Nora's face.

"It's unfortunate that when anyone *tells* me to do a thing, I have an irresistible desire not to do it."

"I guess I tumbled to that. You must get over it."

"You've spoken to me once or twice in a way I don't like. I think we shall get on better if you *ask* me to do things."

"Don't forget that I can *make* you do them," he said brutally.

"How?" Really, he was amusing!

"Well, I'm stronger than you are."

"A man can hardly use force in his dealings with a woman," she reminded him.

"O-o-o-oh?"

"You seem surprised."

"What's going to prevent him?"

"Don't be so silly," she retorted as she turned to look once more out of the window. But her hands were clammy and, somehow, even though her back was turned toward him, she knew that he was smiling.

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CHAPTER XIII

How much time elapsed before he spoke she had no means of knowing; probably, at most, two or three minutes. But to the woman gazing out blindly through the cobweb-covered window into the night, it might well have been hours. For some illogical reason, which she could not have explained to herself, she had the feeling that the victory in the coming struggle would lie with the one who kept silent the longer. To break the nerve-wrecking spell would be a betrayal of weakness.

None the less, she had arrived at the point when, the tension on her own nerves becoming too great, she felt she must scream, drive her clenched hand through the glass of the window, or perform some other act of hysterical violence; then he spoke, and in the ordinary tone of daily life.

"Well, I'm going to unpack my grip."

The tone, together with the commonplace words, had the effect of a cold douche. She drew a sharp breath of relief, her hands unclenched. She was herself once more. She'd won.

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She turned slowly, as if reluctant to abandon the starry prospect without, to find him bending over a clutter of things scattered about his half-emptied case. She had been about to say that she must see to unpacking some of her own things.

"Wash up them things." He jerked his bowed head toward the littered table.

For the first time, his tone was curt.

But she was too much mistress of herself and the situation now to be more than faintly annoyed by it.

"I'll wash them up in the morning," she said casually. She started toward the door behind which her box had been carried.

"Wash 'em up now, my girl. You'll find the only way to keep things clean is to wash 'em the moment you've done with 'em."

She smiled at him over her shoulder, her hand on the knob of the door. But she did not move.

"Did you hear what I said?"

"I did."

"Then why don't you do as I tell you?"

"Because I don't choose to."

"You ain't taking long to try it out, are you?" His face wore an ugly sneer.

"They say there's no time like the present."

"Are you going to wash up them things?"

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"No."

There was a moment's silence while he held her eyes with his. Then, very slowly and deliberately he got up, poured some boiling water into a pan and placed it, together with a ragged dishcloth, on the table.

"Are you going to wash up them things?"

"No."

She was still cool and smiling: only, her grip on the knob of the door had tightened until the nails of her fingers were white.

"Do you want me to make you?"

"How can you do that?"

"I'll soon show you."

She waited the fraction of a moment.

"I'll just get out those rugs, shall I? I think the holdall was put in here. I expect it gets very cold toward morning."

She had opened the door now and stepped across the threshold. Her face was still turned toward his, but her smile was a little fixed.

"Nora."

"Yes."

"Come here."

"Why?"

"Because I tell you to."

Still, she did not move. In two strides he was over at her side. He stretched out his hand to seize her by the wrist.

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"You daren't touch me!"

She pulled the door to sharply and stood with her back against it, facing him. Her face was as white as a linen mask, and about as expressionless. Only her eyes lived. Anger and fear had enlarged the pupils until they seemed black in the dead white of her face.

"You daren't!" she repeated.

"I daren't: who told you that?"

"Have you forgotten that I'm a woman?"

"No, I haven't. That's why I'm going to make you do as I tell you. If you were a man, I mightn't be able to. Come, now."

He made a movement to take her by the arm, but she was too quick for him. With the quickness of a cat, she slipped aside. The next moment, to his astonishment, he felt a stinging blow on the ear. He stared at her dumbfounded. It is safe to hazard that never in his life had he been so utterly taken aback.

She met his stare without lowering her glance. But she was panting now as if she had been running, one clenched hand pressed against her heaving breast.

He gave a short laugh, half of amused admiration at her daring, and half of anger.

"That was a darned silly thing to do!"

"What did you expect?"

"I expected that you were cleverer than to hit me. You ought to know that when it comes to—to muscle, I guess I've got the bulge on you."

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"I'm not frightened of you."

It was a stupid thing to say. Nora realized it too late. If she had only been able to hold her tongue, he might have relented, she thought. But at her words, his face hardened once more and the same steely glitter came into his eyes. "Now come and wash up these things."

"I won't, I tell you!"

"Come on."

Quickly grasping her by the wrists, he began to drag her slowly but steadily to the table. Earlier in the evening she had boasted that she was as strong as a horse. As a matter of fact, she had unusual strength for a woman. But she was quickly made to realize that her strength, even intensified as it was by her anger was, of course, nothing compared with his. Strain and resist as she might, she could neither release herself from his grasp nor prevent him from forcing her nearer and nearer to the table which was his goal. In the struggle one of the large shell hair pins which she wore fell to the floor. In another second she heard it ground to pieces under his heel. A long strand of hair came billowing down below her waist.

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Another moment, and by making a long arm, he could reach the table. With a quick movement for which she was unprepared, he brought her two hands sharply together so that he could hold both of her wrists with one hand, leaving the other free.

"Let me go, let me go!"

She kicked him, first on one shin and then on the other. But their bodies were too close together for the blows to have any force.

"Come on now, my girl. What's the good of making a darned fuss about it." His laugh was boyish in its exultant good-nature.

"You brute, how dare you touch me! You'll never force me to do anything. Let go! Let go! Let go!"

And now, his free hand held fast the edge of the table. With a quick movement she bent down and fastened her teeth in the skin of the back of his hand. With an exclamation of pain, he released her, carrying his wounded hand instinctively to his mouth.

"Gee, what sharp teeth you've got!"

"You cad! you cad!" she panted.

"I never thought you'd bite," he said, looking at his bleeding hand ruefully. "That ain't much like a lady, according to *my* idea."

"You filthy cad! To hit a woman!"

"Gee, I didn't hit you. You smacked my face and kicked my shins, and you bit my hand. And now

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you say I hit *you*."

He picked up his pipe from the table and mechanically rammed the tobacco down with his thumb and looked about for a match.

"You beast! I hate you!"

In the height of her passion she unconsciously began twisting up the loosened strand of her hair.

"I don't care about that, so long as you wash them cups."

With a furious gesture she swept the table clean.

"Look!" she screamed, as cups, saucers, plates and teapot broke into a thousand pieces at his feet.

There came another little sound of something breaking, like a faint echo far away. It was his pipe which had fallen among the wreckage. In his astonishment at her sudden action, he had bitten through the mouthpiece.

"That's a pity; we're terribly short of crockery. We shall have to drink our tea out of cans now," was all he said.

"I said I wouldn't wash them, and I haven't washed them," Nora exulted.

"They don't need it now, I guess," he said humorously.

"I think I've won!"

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"Sure," he said without the slightest trace of rancor. "Now take the broom and sweep up all the darned mess you've made."

"I won't!"

"Look here, my girl," he said threateningly, "I guess I've had about enough of your nonsense: you do as you're told and look sharp about it."

"You can kill me, if you like!"

"What would be the good of that? Women, as you reminded me a little while back, are scarce in Manitoba."

He gave a searching look around the room and spying the broom in the corner, went over and fetched it.

"Here's the broom."

"If you want that mess swept up, you can sweep it up yourself."

"Look here, you make me tired!"

His tone suggested that he was becoming more irritated. But Nora was beyond caring. As he put the broom in her hand, she flung it from her as far as she could. "Look here," he said again, and this time there was no mistaking the menace in his voice, "if you don't clean up that mess at once, I'll give you the biggest hiding you ever had in your life, I promise you that."

"You?" she jeered.

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"Yours truly," he said, nodding his head. "I've done with larking now." He began rolling up the sleeves of his sweater. For some obscure reason—possibly because his deliberation seemed to connote implacability—this simple action filled her with a terror that she had not known before even in the midst of their physical struggle.

"Help! Help! Help!" she screamed.

She rushed across the room and threw open the door, sending her agonized appeal out into the night.

"Help! Help! Help!"

She strained her ears for any sign of response.

"What's the good of that? There's no one within a mile of us. Listen."

It is doubtful if she heard his words. If she had, it would have mattered but little. The answering silence which engulfed her like a wave told her that she was lost. She bowed her head in her hands. Her whole slender body was wrecked with hard, dry sobs. When she lifted her head, he read in her eyes the anguish of the conquered. Nevertheless, she made one last stand.

"If you so much as touch me, I'll have you up for cruelty. There are laws to protect me."

"I don't care a curse for the laws," he laughed. "I know I'm going to be master here. And if I tell you to do a thing, you've darned well got to do it, because I can make you. Now stop this fooling. Pick up that crockery and get the broom."

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"I won't!"

He made one stride toward her.

"No, don't. Don't hurt me!" she shrieked.

"I guess there's only one law here," he said. "And that's the law of the strongest. I don't know nothing about cities; perhaps men and women are equal there. But on the prairie, a man's the master because he's bigger and stronger than a woman."

"Frank!"

"Damn you, don't talk."

She did not move. Her eyes were on the ground. Pride and Fear were having their last struggle, and Fear conquered. Without looking at her husband she could feel that his patience was nearing an end. Very slowly she stooped down and picked up the teapot and the broken cups and saucers and laid them on the table. Blindly she tottered over to the rocking-chair and burst into a passion of tears.

"And I thought I knew what it was to be unhappy!"

He watched her with a slight, but not unkindly, smile on his face.

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"Come on, my girl," he said, without any trace of anger, "don't shirk the rest of it."

Through her laced fingers, she looked at the mess of spilled tea on the floor. Keeping her tear-marred face turned away from him, she slowly got up, and slowly found the broom and swept it all into a little heap on the newspaper that lay where he had left it.

Suddenly she threw back her head. Her eyes shone with a new resolution. He watched her, wondering. With a quick, firm step, she carried the rolled-up paper to the stove and shoved it far into the glowing embers. Gathering up the crockery, after a glance around the room in search of some receptacle which her eye did not find, she carried it over to the wood-pile, laying it upon the logs. The broom was restored to its corner. She took up her hat and coat and began to put them on.

"What are you doing?"

"I've done what you *made* me do, now I'm going."

"Where, if I might ask?"

"What do I care, as long as I get away."

"You ain't under the impression that there's a first-class hotel round the corner, are you? There ain't."

"I can go to the Sharps."

"I guess they're in bed and asleep by now."

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"I'll wake them."

"You'd never find your way. It's pitch dark. Look."

He threw open the door. It was true. The sky had clouded over. The feeling of the air had changed. It smelt of storm.

"I'll sleep out of doors, then."

"On the prairie? Why, you'd freeze to death before morning."

"What does it matter to you whether I live or die?"

"It matters a great deal. Once more, let me remind you that women are scarce in Manitoba."

"Are you going to keep me from going?"

"Sure."

He closed the door and placed his back against it.

"You can't keep me here against my will. If I don't go to-night, I can go to-morrow."

"To-morrow's a long, long way off."

Her hand flew to her throat.

"Frank! What do you mean?"

"I don't know what silly fancies you've had in your head; but when I married you I intended that you should be a proper wife to me."

"But—but—but you understood."

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It was all she could do to force the words from her dry throat. With a desperate effort she pulled herself together and tried to talk calmly and reasonably.

"I'm sorry for the way I've behaved, Frank. It was silly and childish of me to struggle with you. You irritated me, you see, by the way you spoke and the tone you took."

"Oh, I don't mind. I don't know much about women and I guess they're queer. We had to fix things up sometime and I guess there's no harm in getting it over right now."

"You've beaten me all along the line and I'm in your power. Have mercy on me!"

"I guess you won't have much cause to complain."

"I married you in a fit of temper. It was very stupid of me. I'm very sorry that I—that I've been all this trouble to you. Won't you let me go?"

"No, I can't do that."

"I'm no good to you. You've told me that I'm useless. I can't do any of the things that you want a wife to do. Oh," she ended passionately, "you can't be so hard-hearted as to make me pay with all my whole life for one moment's madness!"

"What good will it do you if I let you go? Will you go to Gertie and beg her to take you back again? You've got too much pride for that." [Pg 218]

She made a gesture of abnegation: "I don't think I've got much pride left."

"Don't you think you'd better give it a try?"

Once more hope wakened in Nora's heart. His tone was so reasonable. If she kept her self-control, she might yet win. She sat down on one of the stools and spoke in a tone that was almost conversational.

"All this life is so strange to me. Back in England, they think it's so different from what it really is. I thought I should have a horse to ride, that there would be dances and parties. And when I came out, I was so out of it all. I felt in the way. And yesterday Gertie drove me frantic so that I felt I couldn't stay a moment longer in that house. I acted on impulse. I didn't know what I was doing. I made a mistake. You can't have the *heart* to take advantage of it."

"I knew you was making a mistake, but that was your lookout. When I sell a man a horse, he can look it over for himself. I ain't obliged to tell him its faults."

"Do you mean to say that after I've begged you almost on my knees to let me go, you'll force me to stay?"



FRANK GLIMPSES THE APPROACHING STORM THAT MEANS HIS RUIN.

"That's what I mean."

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"Oh, why did I ever trap myself so!"

"Come, my girl, let's let bygones be bygones," he said good-humoredly. "Come, give me a kiss."

She tried a new tack.

"I'm not in love with you," she said in a matter-of-fact voice.

"I guessed that."

"And you're not in love with me."

"You're a woman and I'm a man."

"Do you want me to tell you in so many words that you're physically repellent to me? That the

thought of letting you kiss me horrifies and disgusts me?" In spite of her resolution, her voice was rising.

"Thank you." He was still good-humored.

"Look at your hands; it gives me goose-flesh when you touch me."

"Cuttin' down trees, diggin', lookin' after horses don't leave them very white and smooth."

"Let me go! Let me go!"

He took a step away from the door. His whole manner changed.

"See here, my girl. You was educated like a lady and spent your life doin' nothing. Oh, I forgot: you was a lady's companion, wasn't you? And you look on yourself as a darned sight better than me. I never had no schooling. It's a hell of a job for me to write a letter. But since I was so high"—his hand measured a distance of about three feet from the floor—"I've earned my living. I guess I've been all over this country. I've been a trapper, I've worked on the railroad and for two years I've been a freighter. I guess I've done pretty nearly everything but clerk in a store. Now you just get busy and forget all the nonsense you've got in your head. You're nothing but an ignorant woman and I'm your master. I'm goin' to do what I like with you. And if you don't submit willingly, by God I'll take you as the trappers, in the old days, used to take the squaws."

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For the last moment Nora could hardly have been said to have listened. In a delirium of terror her eyes swept the little cabin, searching desperately for some means of escape. As he made a step toward her, her roving eye suddenly fell on her husband's gun, standing where Sharp had left it when he brought it in. With a bound, she was across the room, the gun at her shoulder. With an oath, Frank started forward.

"If you move, I'll kill you!"

"You daren't!"

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"Unless you open that door and let me go, I'll shoot you—I'll shoot you!"

"Shoot, then!" He held his arms wide, exposing his broad chest.

With a sobbing cry, she pulled the trigger. The click of the falling hammer was heard, nothing more.

"Gee whiz!" shouted Taylor in admiration. "Why, you meant it!"

The gun fell clattering to the floor.

"It wasn't loaded?"

"Of course it wasn't loaded. D'you think I'd have stood there and told you to shoot if it had been? I guess I ain't thinking of committin' suicide."

"And I almost admired you!"

"You hadn't got no reason to. There's nothing to admire about a man who stands five feet off a loaded gun that's being aimed at him. He'd be a darned fool, that's all."

"You were laughing at me all the time."

"You'd have had me dead as mutton if that gun 'ud been loaded. You're a sport, all right, all right. I never thought you had it in you. You're the girl for me, I guess!"

As she stood there, dazed, perfectly unprepared, he threw his arms around her and attempted to kiss her.

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"Let me alone! I'll kill myself if you touch me!"

"I guess you won't." He kissed her full on the mouth, then let her go.

Sinking into a chair, she sobbed in helpless, angry despair.

"Oh, how shameful, how shameful!"

He let her alone for a little; then, when the violence of her sobbing had died away, came over and laid his hand gently on her shoulder.

"Hadn't you better cave in, my girl? You've tried your strength against mine and it hasn't amounted to much. You even tried to shoot me and I only made you look like a darned fool. I guess you're beat, my girl. There's only one law here. That's the law of the strongest. You've got to do what I want because I can make you."

"Haven't you any generosity?"

"Not the kind you want, I guess."

She gave a little moan of anguish.

"Hark!" He held up his hand as if to call her attention to something. For a moment, hope flamed from its embers. But stealing a glance at his face from beneath her drooping lashes, she saw that

she was mistaken. The last spark died, to be rekindled no more.

"Listen! Listen to the silence. Can't you hear it, the silence of the prairie? Why, we might be the only two people in the world, you and me, here in this little shack, right out *in* the prairie. Are you listening? There ain't a sound. It might be the garden of Eden. What's that about male and female, created He them? I guess you're my wife, my girl. And I want you."

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Nora gave him a sidelong look of terror and remained dumb. What would have been the use of words even if she could have found voice to utter them?

Taking up the lamp, he went to the door of the bedroom and threw it wide. She saw without looking that he remained standing, like a statue of Fate, on the threshold.

To gain time, she picked up the dishcloth and began to scrub at an imaginary spot on the table.

"I guess it's getting late. You'll be able to have a good clean-out to-morrow."

"To-morrow!" A violent shudder, similar to the convulsion of the day before, shook her from head to foot. But she kept on with her scrubbing.

"Come!"

The word smote her ear with all the impact of a cannon shot. The walls caught it, and gave it back. There *was* no other sound in heaven or earth than the echo of that word!

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Shame, anguish and fear, in turn, passed over her face. Then, with her hands before her eyes, she passed beyond him, through the door which he still held open.

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CHAPTER XIV

The storm which the night had foreshadowed broke with violence before dawn. At times during the night, the wind had howled about the little building in a way which recalled to Nora one of the best-remembered holidays of her childhood. She and her mother had gone to Eastborne for a fortnight with some money Eddie had sent them shortly after his arrival in Canada. The autumnal equinox had caught them during the last days of their stay, and the strong impression which the wind had made upon her childish mind had remained with her ever since.

Lying, wakeful through the long hours, staring wide-eyed out of the little curtainless window into the thick darkness, thick enough to seem palpable; the memory of how, on that far-off day she had passed long hours with her nose flattened against the window of the dingy little lodging-house drawing-room watching the wonder of the wind-lashed sea, came back to her with extraordinary vividness.

The spectacle had filled her with a sort of terrified exultation. She had longed to go out and stand on the wind-buffeted pier and take her part in this saturnalia of the elements. She had something of the same feeling now; a longing to leave her bed and go out onto the windswept prairie.

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Strangely enough, she had no sensation of fatigue or weariness either bodily or mentally. Her mind, indeed, seemed extraordinarily active. Little petty details of her childhood and of her life with Miss Wickham, long forgotten, such as the day the gardener had cut his thumb, trooped through her mind in an endless procession. She had a strange feeling that she would never sleep again.

But just as the blackness without seemed turning into heavy grayness, lulled possibly by the wind which had moderated its violence and had now sunk to a moan not unpleasant, and by the rhythmic breathing of the sleeping man at her side, she fell asleep.

For several hours she must have slept heavily, indeed. For when she awoke, it was to find the place at her side empty. Hurriedly dressing herself, she went out into the living-room. That was empty, too. But the lamp was lighted, the kettle was singing merrily on the stove and the fire was burning brightly. And outside was a whirling veil of snow which made it impossible to see beyond the length of one's arm.

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Had she been marooned on an island in the ultimate ocean of the Antarctic, she could not have felt more cut off from the world she knew. Well, it was better so.

She wondered what had become of Frank. Surely on a day like this there could be nothing to do outside; and even if there were, nothing so imperative as to take him away before he had had his breakfast. She felt a little hurt at his leaving without a word.

Evidently, he expected to return soon, however. The table was laid for two. She felt her face crimson as she saw that there was but one cup left. One of them must drink from one of those horrible tin cans. She did not ask herself which one it would be.

Partly to occupy herself and to take her thoughts away from the recollection of the events of the evening before, and partly prompted by a desire to have everything in readiness against her husband's return, she busied herself with the preparations for breakfast.

There were some eggs and a filch of bacon which they had brought from Winnipeg. She would

make some toast, too. Very likely he didn't care for it, they certainly never had it at Gertie's, but in *her house*— She smiled to think how quickly, in her mind, she had taken possession. [Pg 228]

She was just beginning to think that she had been foolish to start her cooking without knowing at all when he was going to return, when she heard a great stamping and scraping of feet outside, and in another moment Frank's snow-covered figure darkened the doorway.

"Getting on with the breakfast? That's fine!" he called.

"It's quite ready: wherever have you been? I wouldn't have imagined that anyone could find a thing to do outside on a day like this."

"Oh, there's always something to do. But I just ran up to the Sharps' for a minute. I knew old mother Sharp wouldn't keep her promise about coming down to-day. She's all right, but she does hate to walk."

"Well, I'm sure I wouldn't blame anyone for choosing to stay indoors a day like this. But what did you want to see her in such a hurry for?"

"Oh, nothin' particular; I sort of thought maybe you wouldn't mind having a little milk with your tea on a gloomy morning like this," he said shamefacedly.

"That was awfully good of you; thank you very much," she said with real gratitude, as she thought of him tramping those two miles in the blinding storm. [Pg 229]

"Do you think we are in for a blizzard?" she asked when they were at the table. To her unspeakable relief, she found that the one cup was intended for her; he had waved her toward the one chair, apparently the place of honor, contenting himself with one of the stools.

"N-o-o," he said, "I don't think so. It's beginning to lighten up a little already. And besides, don't you remember that I foretold a mildish winter?"

"I was forgetting that I had married a prophet," she smiled.

But all through the day the snow continued to fall steadily, although the wind had died away and, at intervals, the sun shone palely. At nightfall, it was still snowing.

The day passed quickly, as Nora found plenty to occupy herself with. By supper time she felt healthfully tired, with the added comfortable feeling that, for a novice, she had really accomplished a good deal.

The whole room certainly looked cleaner and the pots and pans, although not shining, were as near to it as hot water and scrubbing could make them. Fortunately, she had a quantity of fresh white paper in her trunk which greatly improved the appearance of the shelves. [Pg 230]

During the day Frank left the house for longer or shorter intervals on various pretexts which she felt must be largely imaginary, trumped up for the occasion. She was agreeably surprised to find that he was sufficiently tactful to divine that she wanted to be alone.

While he was in the house he smoked his pipe incessantly and read some magazines which she had unpacked with some of her books. But she never glanced suddenly in his direction without finding that he was watching her.

"I tell *you*, this is fine," he said heartily as he was lighting his after-supper pipe. "Mrs. Sharp won't hardly know the place when she comes over. She's never seen it except when I was housekeeper. She doesn't think I'm much good at it. Leastways, she's always tellin' Sid that if she dies, he must marry again right away as soon as he can find anyone to have him, for fear the house gets to looking like this."

"That doesn't look like a very strong indorsement," Nora admitted.

The next day Nora woke to a world of such dazzling whiteness that she was blinded every time she attempted to look out on it.

"You want to be careful," her husband cautioned her; "getting snow-blinded isn't as much fun as you'd think. Even I get bad sometimes; and I'm used to it. Looks like one of them Christmas cards, don't it? Somebody sent Gertie one once and she showed it to us." [Pg 231]

That afternoon, Mr. Sharp drove his wife down for the promised visit. As in his judgment the two women would want to be alone, he proposed to Frank to drive back home with him to give him the benefit of his opinion on some improvements he was contemplating.

"You're only wasting your time," Mrs. Sharp had remarked grimly. "There ain't going to be anything done to any of them barns before I get a lean-to on the house. You'd think even a man would know that a house that's all right for two gets a little small for seven," she added, scornfully, to Nora.

"Are there seven of you?"

"Me and Sid and five little ones. If that don't make seven, I've forgotten all the 'rithmetic I ever learned," said Mrs. Sharp briefly. "And let me tell you, you who're just starting in, that having children out here on the prairie half the time with no proper care, and particularly in winter, when maybe you're snowed up and the doctor can't get to you, ain't my idea of a bank holiday."

"I shouldn't think it would be," said Nora, sincerely shocked, although she found it difficult to hide a smile at her visitor's comparison; bank holidays being among her most horrid recollections.

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Mrs. Sharp, despite a rather emphatic manner which softened noticeably as her visit progressed, turned out to be a stout, red-faced woman of middle age who seemed to be troubled with a chronic form of asthma. She was as unmistakably English as her husband. But like him, she had lost much of her native accent, although occasionally one caught a faint trace of the Cockney. She had two rather keen brown eyes which, as she talked, took in the room to its smallest detail.

"Well, I declare, I think you've done wonders considering you've only had a day and not used to work like this," she said heartily. "When Sid told me that Frank was bringing home a wife I said to myself: 'Well, I don't envy her *her* job; comin' to a shack that ain't been lived in for nigh unto six months and when it was, with only a man runnin' it.'"

"You don't seem to have a very high opinion of men's ability in the domestic line," said Nora with a smile.

"I can tell you just how high it is," said Mrs. Sharp with decision. "I would just as soon think of consultin' little Sid—an' he's goin' on three—about the housekeepin' as I would his father. It ain't a man's work. Why should he know anything about it?"

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"Still," demurred Nora, "lots of men look after themselves somehow."

"Somehow's just the word; they never get beyond that. Of course I knew Frank would be sure to marry some day. And with his good looks it's a wonder he didn't do so long ago. Most girls is so crazy about a good-lookin' fellow that they never stop to think if he has anything else to him. Not that he hasn't lots of good traits, I don't mean that. But," she added shrewdly, "you don't look like the silly sort that would be taken in by good looks alone."

"No," said Nora dryly, "I don't think I am."

After that, until the two men returned, they talked of household matters, and Nora found that her new neighbor had a store of useful and practical suggestions to make, and, what was even better, seemed glad to place all her experience at her disposal in the kindest and most friendly manner possible, entirely free from any trace of that patronage which had so maddened her in her sister-in-law.

"Now mind you," called Mrs. Sharp, as she laboriously climbed up to the seat beside her husband as they were driving away, "if Frank, here, gets at all upish—and he's pretty certain to, all newly married men do—you come to me. I'll settle him, never fear."

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Frank laughed a little over-loudly at this parting shot, and Nora noticed that for some time after their guests had gone, he seemed unusually silent.

As for the Sharps, they also maintained an unwonted silence—which for Mrs. Sharp, at least, was something unusual—until they had arrived at their own door.

"Well?" queried Sharp, as they were about to turn in.

"It beats me," replied his wife. "Why, she's a lady. But she'll come out all right," she finished enigmatically, "she's got the right stuff in her, poor dear!"

In after years, when Nora was able to look back on this portion of her life and see things in just perspective, she always felt that she could never be too thankful that her days had been crowded with occupation. Without that, she must either have gone actually insane, or, in a frenzy of helplessness, done some rash thing which would have marred her whole life beyond repair.

After she found herself growing more accustomed to her new life—and, after all, the growing accustomed to it was the hardest part—she realized that she was only following the universal law of life in paying for her own rash act. The thought that she was paying with interest, being overcharged as it were, was but faint consolation: it only meant that she had been a fool. That conviction is rarely soothing.

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Then, too, she gradually began to look at the situation from Frank's point of view. He had certainly acted within his rights, if with little generosity. But she had to acknowledge to herself that the obligation to be generous on his part was small. She could hardly be said to have treated him with much liberality in the past.

She had used him without scruple as a means to an end. She had made him the instrument for escaping from a predicament which she found unbearably irksome. That she had done so in the heat of passion was small palliation. For the present, at least, she wisely resolved to make the best of things. It could not last forever. The day must come when she could free herself from the bonds that now held her.

It was characteristic of her unyielding pride, of her reluctance to confess to defeat, that the thought of appealing to her brother never once entered her head.

For this reason, it was long before she could bring herself to write the promised letter to Eddie. What was there to say? The things that would have relieved her, in a sense, to tell, must remain forever locked in her own heart. In the end, she compromised by sending a letter confined entirely to describing her new home. As she read it over, she thanked the Fates that Eddie's was

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not a subtle or analytical mind. He would read nothing between the lines. But Gertie? Well, it couldn't be helped!

It was some two months after her marriage that she received a letter from Miss Pringle in answer to the one she had written while she was still an inmate of her brother's house.

Miss Pringle confined herself largely to an account of her Continental wanderings and her bloodless encounters with various foreigners and their ridiculous un-English customs from which she had emerged triumphant and victorious. Mrs. Hubbard's precarious state of health had led her into being unusually captious, it seemed. Miss Pringle was more than ever content to be back in Tunbridge Wells, where all the world was, by comparison, sane and reasonable in behavior.

When it came to touching upon her friend's amazing environment and unconventional experiences, Miss Pringle was discretion itself. But if her paragraphs had bristled with exclamation points, they could not, to one who understood her mental processes, have more clearly betrayed her utter disapproval and amazement that English people, and descendants of English people, could so far forget themselves as to live in any such manner.

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Replying to this letter was only a degree less hard than writing to Eddie. Nora's ready pen faltered more than once, and many pages were destroyed before an answer was sent. She confined herself entirely to describing the new experience of a Canadian winter. Of her departure from her brother's roof and of her marriage, she said nothing whatever.

In accordance with her resolution to make the best of things, she set about making the shack more comfortable and homelike. There were many of those things which, small in themselves, count for much, that her busy brain planned to do during the time taken up in the necessary overhauling. This cleaning-up process had taken several days, interrupted as it was by the ordinary daily routine.

To her unaccustomed hand, the task of preparing three hearty meals a day was a matter that consumed a large amount of time, but gradually, day by day, she found herself systematizing her task and becoming less inexpert. To be sure she made many mistakes; once, indeed, in a fit of preoccupation, while occupied in rearranging the bedroom, burning up the entire dinner.

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Upon his return, her husband had found her red-eyed and apologetic.

"Oh, well!" he said. "It ain't worth crying over. What is the saying? 'Hell wasn't built in a day?'"

Nora screamed with laughter. "I think you're mixing two old saws. Rome wasn't built in a day and Hell is paved with good intentions."

"Well," he laughed good-naturedly, "they both seem to hit the case."

He certainly was unfailingly good-tempered. Not that there were not times when Nora did not have to remind herself of her new resolution and he, for his part, exercise all his forbearance. But in the main, things went more smoothly than either had dared to hope from their inauspicious beginning.

The thing that Nora found hardest to bear was that he never lost a certain masterful manner. It was a continual reminder that she had been defeated. Then, too, he had a maddening way of rewarding her for good conduct which was equally hard to bear, until she realized that it was perfectly unconscious on his part.

For example: after she had struggled for a week with her makeshift kitchen outfit, small in the beginning but greatly reduced by her destructive outburst on the night of their arrival, he had, without saying a word to her of his intentions, driven over to Prentice and laid in an entire new stock of crockery and several badly needed pots and pans.

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Nora had found it hard to thank him. If they had been labeled "For a Good Child" she could not have felt more humiliated. And what was equally trying, he seemed to have divined her thoughts, for his smile, upon receiving her halting thanks, had not been without a touch of malicious amusement.

On the other hand, all her little efforts to beautify the little house and make it more livable met with his enthusiastic approval and support. He was as delighted as a child with everything she did, and often, when baffled for the moment by some lack of material for carrying out some proposed scheme, he came to the rescue with an ingenious suggestion which solved the vexed problem at once.

And so, gradually, to the no small wonder of her neighbor, Mrs. Sharp, the shack began to take on an air of homely brightness and comfort which that lady's more pretentious place lacked, even after a residence of thirteen years.

Curtains tied back with gay ribands, taken from an old hat and refurbished, appeared at the windows; the old tin syrup cans, pasted over with dark green paper, were made to disgorge their mouldy stores and transform themselves into flower-pots holding scarlet geraniums; even the disreputable, rakish old rocking chair assumed a belated air of youth and respectability, wearing as it did a cushion of discreetly patterned chintz; and the packing-box table hid its deficiencies under a simple cloth. All these magic transformations Nora had achieved with various odds and ends which she found in her trunk.

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Not to be outdone, Frank had contributed a well-made shelf to hold Nora's precious books and a sort of cupboard for her sewing basket and, for the crowning touch, had with much labor contrived some rough chairs to take the place of the packing-box affairs of unpleasant memory.

As has been said, Mrs. Sharp came, saw and wondered; but she had her own theory, all the same, which she confided to her husband.

All these little but significant changes, the result of their co-operative effort, had not been the work of days, but of weeks. By the time they had all been accomplished, the winter was practically over and spring was at hand. Looking back on it, it seemed impossibly short, although there had been times, in spite of her manifold occupations, when it had seemed to Nora that it was longer than any winter she had ever known. She looked forward to the coming spring with both pleasure and dread.

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Through many a dark winter day she had pictured to herself how beautiful the prairie must be, clad in all the verdant livery of the most wonderful of the seasons. And yet it would mean a new solitude and loneliness to her, her husband, of necessity, being away through all the long daylight hours. She began to understand Gertie's dread of having no one to speak to. She avoided asking herself the question as to whether it was loneliness in general or the particular loneliness of missing her husband that she dreaded.

But she was obliged to admit to herself that the winter had wrought more transformations than were to be seen in the little shack.

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CHAPTER XV

It had all come about so subtly and gradually that she was almost unaware of it herself, this inward change *in* herself. Nora had by nature a quick and active mind, but she had also many inherited prejudices. It is a truism that it is much harder to unlearn than to learn, and for her it was harder, in the circumstances, than for the average person. Not that she was more set in her ways than other people, but that she had accepted from her childhood a definite set of ideas as to the proper conduct of life; a code, in other words, from which she had never conceived it possible to depart. People did certain things, or they did not; you played the game according to certain prescribed rules, or you didn't play it with decent people, that was all there was to it. One might as well argue that there was no difference between right and wrong as to say that this was not so.

Of course there were plenty of people on the face of the earth who thought otherwise, such as Chinese, Aborigines, Turks, and all sorts of unpleasant natives of uncivilized countries—Nora lumped them together without discrimination or remorse—but no one planned to pass their lives among them. And as for the sentiment that Trotter had enunciated one day at her brother's, that Canada was a country where everybody was as good as everybody else, that was, of course, utter nonsense. It was because the country was raw and new that such silly notions prevailed. No society could exist an hour founded upon any such theory.

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And yet, here she was living with a man on terms of equality whom, when measured up with the standards she was accustomed to, failed impossibly. And yet, did he? That is, did he, in the larger sense? That he was woefully deficient in all the little niceties of life, that he was illiterate and ignorant could not be denied. But he was no man's fool, and, as far as his light shone, he certainly lived up to it. That was just it. He had a standard of his own.

She compared him with her brother, and with other men she had known and respected. Was he less honest? less brave? less independent? less scrupulous in his dealings with his fellowmen? To all these questions she was obliged to answer "No." And he was proud, too, and ambitious; ambitious to carve out a fortune with his own hands, beholden to neither man nor circumstances for the achievement. Certainly there was much that was fine about him.

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And, as far as his treatment of herself was concerned, after that first terrible struggle for mastery, she had had nothing to complain of. He had been patient with her ignorance and her lack of capabilities in all the things that the women in this new life were so proficient in. Did she not, perhaps, fall as far below *his* standard as he did before hers? There was certainly something to be said on both sides.

There was one quality which he possessed to which she paid ungrudging tribute; never had she met a man so free from all petty pretense. He regretted his lack of opportunities for educating himself, but it apparently never entered his head to pretend a knowledge of even the simplest subject which he did not possess. The questions that he asked her from time to time about matters which almost any schoolboy in England could have answered, both touched and embarrassed her.

At first she had found the evenings the most trying part of the day. When not taken up with her household cares, she found herself becoming absurdly self-conscious in his society. They were neither of them naturally silent people, and it was difficult not to have the air of "talking down" to him, of palpably making conversation. Beyond the people at her brother's and the Sharps, they had not a single acquaintance in common. Her horizon, hitherto, had been, bounded by England,

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his by Canada.

Finally, acting on the suggestion he had made, but never again referred to, the unforgettable day when they were leaving for Winnipeg, she began reading aloud evenings while he worked on his new chairs. The experiment was a great success. Her little library was limited in range; a few standard works and a number of books on travel and some of history. She soon found that history was what he most enjoyed. Things that were a commonplace to her were revealed to him for the first time. And his comments were keen and intelligent, although his point of view was strikingly novel and at the opposite pole from hers. To be sure, she had been accustomed to accepting history merely as a more or less accurate record of bygone events without philosophizing upon it. But to him it was one long chronicle of wrong and oppression. He pronounced the dead and gone sovereigns of England a bad lot and cowardly almost without exception; not apparently objecting to them on the ground that they were kings, as she had at first thought, but because they attained their ends, mostly selfish, through cruelty and oppression, without any regard for humane rights.

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It was the same way with books of travel. The chateaus and castles, with all their atmosphere of story and romance which she had always longed to visit, interested him not a jot. In his opinion they were, one and all, bloody monuments of greed and selfishness; the sooner they were razed to the ground and forgotten, the better for the world.

It was useless to make an appeal for them on artistic grounds; art to him was a doubly sealed book, and yet he frequently disclosed an innate love of beauty in his appreciation of the changing panorama of the winter landscape which stretched on every side before their eyes.

It was a picture which had an inexhaustible fascination for Nora herself, although there were times when the isolation, and above all the unbroken stillness got badly on her nerves. But she could not rid herself of an almost superstitious feeling that the prairie had a lesson to teach her. Twice they went in to Prentice. With these exceptions, she saw no one but her husband and Mr. and Mrs. Sharp.

But it was, strangely enough, from Mrs. Sharp that she drew the most illumination as to the real meaning of this strange new life. Not that Mrs. Sharp was in the least subtle, quite the contrary. She was as hard-headed, practical a person as one could well imagine. But her natural powers of adaptability must have been unusually great. From a small shop in one of the outlying suburbs of London, with its circumscribed outlook, moral as well as physical, to the limitless horizon of the prairie was indeed a far cry. How much inward readjustment such a violent transplanting must require, Nora had sufficient imagination to fully appreciate. But if Mrs. Sharp, herself, were conscious of having not only survived her uprooting but of having triumphantly grown and thrived in this alien soil, she gave no sign of it. Everything, to employ her own favorite phrase with which she breached over inexplicable chasms, "was all in a lifetime."

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As she had a deeply rooted distaste for any form of exercise beyond that which was required in the day's work, most of the visiting between them devolved upon Nora. To her the distance that separated the two houses was nothing, and as she had from the first taken a genuine liking to her neighbor she found herself going over to the Sharps' several times a week.

When, as was natural at first, she felt discouraged over her little domestic failures, she found these neighborly visits a great tonic. Mrs. Sharp was always ready to give advice when appealed to. And unlike Gertie, she never expressed astonishment at her visitor's ignorance, or impatience with her shortcomings. These became more and more infrequent. Nora made up for her total lack of experience by an intelligent willingness to be taught. There was a certain stimulation in the thought that she was learning to manage her own house, that would have been lacking while at her brother's even if Gertie had displayed a more agreeable willingness to impart her own knowledge.

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Nora had always been fond of children, and she found the Sharp children unusually interesting. It was curious to see how widely the ideas of this, the first generation born in the new country, differed, not only from those of their parents, but from what they must have inevitably been if they had remained in the environment that would have been theirs had they been born and brought up back in England.

All of their dreams as to what they were going to do when they grew to manhood were colored and shaped by the outdoor life they had been accustomed to. They were to be farmers and cattle raisers on a large scale. Mrs. Sharp used to shake her head sometimes as she heard these grandiloquent plans, but Nora could see that she was secretly both proud and pleased. After all, why should not these dreams be realized? Everything was possible to the children of this new and wonderful country, if they were only industrious and ambitious.

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"I don't know, I'm sure, what their poor dear grandfather would have said if he had lived to hear them," she used to say sometimes to Nora. "He used to think that there was nothing so genteel as having a good shop. He quite looked down on farming folk. Still, everything is different out here, ideas as well as everything else, and I'm not at all sure they won't be better off in the end."

In which notion Nora secretly agreed with her. To picture these healthy, sturdy, outdoor youngsters confined to a little dingy shop such as their mother had been used to in her own childhood was impossible, as she recalled to her mind the pale, anemic-looking little souls she had occasionally seen during her stay in London. Was not any personal sacrifice worth seeing one's children grow up so strong and healthy, so manly and independent?

This, then, was the true inwardness of it all; the thing that dignified and ennobled this life of toil and hardship, deprived of almost all the things which she had always regarded as necessary, that the welfare, prosperity and happiness of generations yet to come might be reared on this foundation laid by self-denial and deprivation.

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She felt almost humbled in the presence of this simple, unpretentious, kindly woman who had borne so much without complaint that her children might have wider opportunities for usefulness and happiness than she had ever known.

Not that Mrs. Sharp, herself, seemed to think that she was doing anything remarkable. She took it all as a matter of course. It was only when something brought up the subject of the difficulties of learning to do without this or that, that she alluded to the days when she also was inexperienced and had had to learn for herself without anyone to advise or help her.

Miles away from any help other than her husband could give her, she had borne six children and buried one. And although the days of their worst poverty seemed safely behind them, they had been able to save but little, so that they still felt themselves at the mercies of the changing seasons. Given one or two good years to harvest their crops, they might indeed consider themselves almost beyond the danger point. But with seven mouths to feed, one could not afford to lose a single crop.

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With her head teeming with all the new ideas that Mrs. Sharp's experiences furnished, Nora felt that the time was by no means as wasted as she had once thought it would be. There was no reason, after all, that she should sink to the level of a mere domestic drudge. And if this part of her life was not to endure forever, it would not have been entirely barren, since it furnished her with much new material to ponder over. After all, was it really more narrow than her life at Tunbridge Wells? In her heart, she acknowledged that it was not.

To Frank, also, the winter brought a broader outlook. He had looked upon Nora's little refinements of speech and delicate point of view, when he had first known her at her brother's, as finicky, to say the least. All women had fool notions about most things; this one seemed to have more than the average share, that was all. He secretly shared Gertie's opinion that women the world over were all alike in the essentials. He had always been of the opinion that Nora had good stuff in her which would come out once she had been licked into shape. Yet he found himself not only learning to admire her for those same niceties but found himself unconsciously imitating her mannerisms of speech.

Then, too, after they began the habit of reading in the evenings, he found that she had no intention of ridiculing his ignorance and lack of knowledge in matters on which she seemed to him to be wonderfully informed. That they did not by any means always agree in the conclusions they arrived at, in place of irritating him, as he would have thought, he found only stimulating to his imagination. To attack and try to undermine her position, as long as their arguments were conducted with perfect good nature on either side, as they always were, diverted him greatly. And he was secretly pleased when she defended herself with a skill and address that defeated his purpose.

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All the little improvements in the shack were a source of never-ending pride and pleasure to him. Often when at work he found himself proudly comparing his place with its newly added prettiness with the more gaudy ornaments of Mrs. Sharp's or even with Gertie's more pretentious abode. And it was not altogether the pride of ownership that made them suffer in the comparison.

Looking back on the days before Nora's advent seemed like a horrible nightmare from which he was thankful to have awakened. Once in a while he indulged himself in speculating as to how it would feel to go back to the old shiftless, untidy days of his bachelorhood. But he rarely allowed himself to entertain the idea of her leaving, seriously. He was like a child, snugly tucked in his warm bed who, listening to the howling of the wind outside, pictures himself exposed to its harshness in order to luxuriate the more in its warmth and comfort.

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But when, as sometimes happened, he could not close the door of his mind to the thought of how he should ever learn to live without her again, it brought an anguish that was physical as well as mental. Once, looking up from her book, Nora had surprised him sitting with closed eye, his face white and drawn with pain.

Her fright, and above all her pretty solicitude even after he had assuaged her fears by explaining that he occasionally suffered from an old strain which he had sustained a few years before while working in the lumber camps, tried his composure to the utmost.

For days, the memory of the look in her eyes as she bent over him remained in his mind. But he was careful not to betray himself again.

It was to prevent any repetition that he first resorted to working over something while she was reading. While doubly occupied with listening and working with his hands, he found that his mind was less apt to go off on a tangent and indulge in painful and profitless speculations.

For, after all, as she had said, how could he prevent her going if her heart was set on it? That she had given no outward sign of being unhappy or discontented argued nothing. She was far too shrewd to spend her strength in unavailing effort. Pride and ordinary prudence would counsel waiting for a more favorable opportunity than had yet been afforded her. She would not soon forget the lesson of the night he had beaten down her opposition and dragged her pride in the

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dust.

And would she ever forgive it? That was a question that he asked himself almost daily without finding any answer. There was nothing in her manner to show that she harbored resentment or that she was brooding over plans for escaping from the bondage of her life. But women, in his experience, were deep, even cunning. Once given a strong purpose, women like Nora, pursued it to the end. Women of this type were not easily diverted by side issues as men so often were.

For weeks he lived in daily apprehension of Ed's arrival. There was no one else she could turn to, and evoking his aid did not necessarily argue that she must submit again to Gertie's grudging hospitality. Ed might easily, unknown to his masterful better-half, furnish the funds to return to England. She had not written him that he knew of. As a matter of fact, she had not, but she might have given the letter to Sid Sharp to post on one of his not infrequent trips into Prentice. It would only have been by chance that Sid would speak of so trifling a matter. He was much too proud to question him.

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But as time went on and no Ed appeared, he began, if not exactly to hope that, after all she was finding the life not unbearable, at least her leaving was a thing of the more or less remote future. He summoned all his philosophy to his aid. Perhaps by the time she did make up her mind to quit him he would have acquired some little degree of resignation, or at least would not be caught as unprepared as he frankly confessed himself to be at the moment.

The spring, which brought many new occupations, mostly out of doors, had passed, and summer was past its zenith. Frank had worked untiringly from dawn to dark, so wearied that he frequently found it difficult to keep his eyes open until supper was over. But his enthusiasm never flagged. If everything went as well as he hoped, the additional quarter-section was assured. For some reason or other, possibly because he was beginning to feel a reaction after the hard work of the summer, Nora fancied that his spirits were less high than usual. He talked less of the coveted land than was his custom. She, herself, had never, in all her healthy life, felt so glowing with health and strength. She, too, had worked hard, finding almost every day some new task to perform. But aside from the natural fatigue at night, which long hours of dreamless sleep entirely dissipated, she felt all the better for her new experiences. For one thing, her steady improvement in all the arts of the good housewife made her daily routine much easier as well as giving her much secret satisfaction. Never in her life had she looked so well. The summer sun had given her a color which was most becoming.

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CHAPTER XVI

One afternoon, shortly after dinner, she had gone out to gather a nosegay of wild flowers to brighten her little living-room. She was busily engaged in arranging them in a pudding bowl, smiling to think that her hand had lost none of the cunning to which Miss Wickham had always paid grudging tribute, even if her improvised vase was of homely ware, when she heard her husband's step at the door. It was so unusual for him to return at this hour that for a moment she was almost startled.

"I didn't know you were about."

"Oh," he said easily, "I ain't got much to do to-day. I've been out with Sid Sharp and a man come over from Prentice."

"From Prentice?"

Having arranged her flowers to her satisfaction, she stepped back to view the effect. At that moment her husband's eye fell on them.

"Say, what you got there?"

"Aren't they pretty? I picked them just now. They're so gay and cheerful."

"Very." But his tone had none of the enthusiasm with which he usually greeted her efforts to beautify the house.

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"A few flowers make the shack look more bright and cozy."

He took in the room with a glance that approved of everything.

"You've made it a real home, Nora. Mrs. Sharp never stops talking of how you've done it. She was saying only the other day it was because you was a lady. It does make a difference, I guess, although I didn't use to think so."

Nora gave him a smile full of indulgence.

"I'm glad you haven't found me quite a hopeless failure."

"I guess I've never been so comfortable in all my life. It's what I always said: once English girls *do* take to the life, they make a better job of it than anybody."

"What's the man come over from Prentice for?" asked Nora. They were approaching a subject she

always avoided.

"I guess you ain't been terribly happy here, my girl," he said gravely, unmindful of her question.

"What on earth makes you say that?"

"You've got too good a memory, I guess, and you ain't ever forgiven me for that first night."

It was the first time he had alluded to the subject for months. Would he never understand that she wanted to forget it! He might know that it always irritated her. [Pg 259]

"I made up my mind very soon that I must accept the consequences of what I'd done. I've tried to fall in with your ways," she said coldly.

"You was clever enough to see that I meant to be the master in my own house and that I had the strength to make myself so."

How unlike his latter self this boastful speech was. But then he had been utterly unlike himself for several days. What did he mean? She knew him well enough by now to know that he never acted without meaning. But directness was one of his most admirable characteristics. It was unlike him to be devious, as he was being now. But if the winter had taught her anything, it had taught her patience.

"I've cooked for you, mended your clothes, and I've kept the shack clean. I've tried to be obliging and—and obedient." The last word was not yet an easy one to pronounce.

"I guess you hated me, though, sometimes." He gave a little chuckle.

"No one likes being humiliated; and you humiliated me."

"Ed's coming here presently, my girl."

"Ed who?"

"Your brother Ed."

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"Eddie! When?"

"Why, right away, I guess. He was in Prentice this morning."

"How do you know?"

"He 'phoned over to Sharp to say he was riding out."

"Oh, how splendid! Why didn't you tell me before?"

"I didn't know about it."

"Is that why you asked me if I was happy? I couldn't make out what was the matter with you."

"Well, I guess I thought if you still wanted to quit, Ed's coming would be kind of useful."

Nora sat down in one of the chairs and gave him a long level look.

"What makes you think that I want to?" she said quietly.

"You ain't been so very talkative these last months, but I guess it wasn't so hard to see sometimes that you'd have given pretty near anything in the world to quit."

"I've no intention of going back to Eddie's farm, if that's what you mean."

To this he made no reply. Still with the same grave air, he went over to the door and started out again, pausing a moment after he had crossed the threshold.

"If Ed comes before I get back, tell him I won't be long. I guess you won't be sorry to do a bit of yarning with him all by yourself." [Pg 261]

"You are not going away with the idea that I'm going to say beastly things to him about you, are you?"

"No, I guess not. That ain't your sort. Perhaps we don't know the best of one another yet, but I reckon we know the worst by this time."

"Frank!" she said sharply. "There's something the matter. What is it?"

"Why, no; there's nothing. Why?"

"You've not been yourself the last few days."

"I guess that's only your imagination. Well, I'd better be getting along. Sid and the other fellow'll be waiting for me."

Without another look in her direction, he was gone, closing the door after him.

Nora remained quite still for several minutes, biting her lips and frowning in deep thought. It was all very well to say that there was nothing the matter, but there was. Did he think she could live with him day after day all these months and not notice his change of mood, even if she could not

translate it? He had still a great deal to learn about women!

On the way over to the shelf to get her work, she paused a moment beside her flowers to cheer herself once more with their brightness. Sitting down by the table, she began to darn one of her husband's thick woolen socks. An instant later she was startled by a loud knock on the door.

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With a little cry of pleasure she flung it open, to find Eddie standing outside. She gave a cry of delight. Somehow, the interval since she had seen him last, significant as it was in bringing to her the greatest change her life had known, seemed for the second longer than all the years she had spent in England without seeing him.

"Eddie! Oh, my dear, I'm so glad to see you!" she cried, flinging her arms around his neck.

"Hulloa there," he said awkwardly.

"But how did you come? I didn't hear any wheels."

"Look." He pointed over to the shed; she looked over his shoulder to see Reggie Hornby grinning at her from the seat of a wagon.

"Why, it's Reggie Hornby. Reggie!" she called.

Reggie took off his broad hat with a flourish.

"Tell him he can put the horse in the lean-to."

"All right. Reg," called Marsh, "give the old lady a feed and put her in the lean-to."

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"Right-o!"

"Didn't you meet Frank? He's only just this moment gone out."

"No."

"He'll be back presently. Now, come in. Oh, my dear, *it is* splendid to see you!"

"You're looking fine, Nora."

"Have you had your dinner?"

"Sure. We got something to eat before we left Prentice."

"Well, you'll have a cup of tea?"

"No, I won't have any, thanks."

"Ah," laughed Nora happily, "you're not a real Canadian yet, if you refuse a cup of tea when it's offered you. But do sit down and make yourself comfortable," she said, fairly pushing him into a chair.

"How are you getting along, Nora?" His manner was still a little constrained. They were both thinking of their last parting. But she, being a woman, could carry it off better.

"Oh, never mind about me," she said gayly. "Tell me all about yourself. How's Gertie? And what has brought you to this part of the world? And what's Reggie Hornby doing here? And is Thingamajig still with you; you know, the hired man?"—The word "other" almost slipped out. —"What *was* his name, Trotter, wasn't it? Oh, my dear, don't sit there like a stuffed pig, but answer my questions, or I'll shake you."

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"My dear child, I can't answer fifteen questions all at once!"

"Oh, Eddie, I'm so glad to see you! You are a perfect duck to come and see me."

"Now let me get a word in edgeways."

"I won't utter another syllable. But, for goodness' sake, hurry up. I want to know all sorts of things."

"Well, the most important thing is that I'm expecting to be a happy father in three or four months."

"Oh, Eddie, I'm so glad! How happy Gertie must be."

"She doesn't know what to make of it. But I guess she's pleased right enough. She sends you her love and says she hopes you'll follow her example very soon."

"I?" said Nora sharply. "But," she added with a return to her gay tone, "you've not told me what you're doing in this part of the world, anyway."

"Anyway?"

Nora blushed. "I've practically spoken to no one but Frank for months; it's natural that I should fall into his way of speaking."

"Well, when I got Frank's letter about the clearing-machine——"

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"Frank has written to you?"

"Why, yes; didn't you know? He said there was a clearing-machine going cheap at Prentice. I've always thought I could make money down our way if I had one. They say you can clear from three to four acres a day with one. Frank thought it was worth my while to come and have a look at it and he said he guessed you'd be glad to see me."

"How funny of him not to say anything to me about it," said Nora, frowning once more.

"I suppose he wanted to surprise you. And now for yourself; how do you like being a married woman?"

"Oh, all right. But you haven't answered half my questions yet. Why has Reggie Hornby come with you?"

"Do you realize I've not seen you since before you were married?"

"That's so; you haven't, have you?"

"I've been a bit anxious about you. That's why, when Frank wrote about the clearing-machine, I didn't stop to think about it, but just came."

"It was awfully nice of you. But why has Reggie Hornby come?"

"Oh, he's going back to England."

"Is he?"

"Yes, he got them to send his passage money at last. His ship doesn't sail till next week, and he said he might just as well stop over here and say good-by to you." [Pg 266]

"How has he been getting on?"

"How do you expect? He looks upon work as something that only damned fools do. Where's Frank?"

"Oh, he's out with Sid Sharp. Sid's our neighbor. He has the farm you passed on your way here."

"Getting on all right with him, Nora?"

"Why, of course," said Nora with just a suggestion of irritation in her voice.

"What's that boy doing all this time?" she asked, going over to the window and looking out. "He *is* slow, isn't he?"

But Marsh was not a man whom it was easy to side-track.

"It's a great change for you, this, after the sort of life you've been used to."

"I was rather hoping you'd have some letters for me," said Nora from the window. "I haven't had a letter for a long time."

As a matter of fact she had no reason to expect any, not having answered Miss Pringle's last and having practically no other correspondent. But the speech was a happy one, in that it created the desired diversion.

"There now!" said her brother with an air of comical consternation. "I've got a head like a sieve. Two came by the last mail. I didn't forward them, because I was coming myself." [Pg 267]

"You don't mean to tell me you've forgotten them!"

"No; here they are."

Nora took them with a show of eagerness. "They don't look very exciting," she said, glancing at them. "One's from Agnes Pringle, the lady's companion that I used to know at Tunbridge Wells, you remember. And the other's from Mr. Wynne."

"Who's he?"

"Oh, he was Miss Wickham's solicitor. He wrote to me once before to say he hoped I was getting on all right. I don't think I want to hear from people in England any more," she said in a low voice, more to herself than to him, tossing the letters on the table.

"My dear, why do you say that?"

"It's no good thinking of the past, is it?"

"Aren't you going to read your letters?"

"Not now; I'll read them when I'm alone."

"Don't mind me."

"It's silly of me; but letters from England always make me cry."

"Nora! Then you aren't happy here."

"Why shouldn't I be?"

"Then why haven't you written to me but once since you were married?"

"I hadn't anything to say. And then," carrying the war into the enemy's quarter, "I'd been practically turned out of your house."

"I don't know what to make of you. Frank Taylor's kind to you and all that sort of thing, isn't he?"

"Very. But don't cross-examine me, there's a dear."

"When I asked you to come and make your home with me, I thought it mightn't be long before you married. But I didn't expect you to marry one of the hired men."

"Oh, my dear, please don't worry about me." Nora was about at the end of her endurance.

"It's all very fine to say that; but you've got no one in the world belonging to you except me."

"Don't, I tell you."

"Nora!"

"Now listen. We've never quarreled once since the first day I came here. Now are you satisfied?"

She said it bravely, but it was with a feeling of unspeakable relief that she saw Reggie Hornby at the door.

She certainly had never before been so genuinely glad to see him. As she smilingly held out her hand, her eye took in his changed appearance. Gone were the overalls and the flannel shirt, the heavy boots and broad belt. Before her stood the Reggie of former days in a well-cut suit of blue serge and spotless linen. She was surprised to find herself thinking, after all, men looked better in flannels. [Pg 269]

"I was wondering what on earth you were doing with yourself," she said gayly.

"I say," he said, his eye taking in the bright little room, "this is a swell shack you've got."

"I've tried to make it look pretty and homelike."

"Helloa, what's this!" said Marsh, whose eye had fallen for the first time on the bowl of flowers.

"Aren't they pretty? I've only just picked them. They're mustard flowers."

"We call them weeds. Have you much of it?"

"Oh, yes; lots. Why?"

"Oh, nothing."

"Eddie tells me you're going home."

"Yes," said Reggie, seating himself and carefully pulling up his trousers. "I'm fed up for my part with God's own country. Nature never intended me to be an agricultural laborer." [Pg 270]

"No? And what are you going to do now?"

"Loaf!" Mr. Hornby's tone expressed profound conviction.

"Won't you get bored?" smiled Nora.

"I'm never bored. It amuses me to watch other people do things. I should hate my fellow-creatures to be idle."

"I should think one could do more with life than lounge around clubs and play cards with people who don't play as well as oneself."

Hornby gave her a quick ironic look. "I quite agree with you," he said with his most serious air. "I've been thinking things over very seriously this winter. I'm going to look out for a middle-aged widow with money who'll adopt me."

"I recall that you have decided views about the White Man's Burden."

"All I want is to get through life comfortably. I don't mean to do a stroke more work than I'm obliged to, and I'm going to have the very best time I can."

"I'm sure you will," said Nora, smiling.

But her smile was a little mechanical. Somehow she could no longer be genuinely amused at such sentiments which, in spite of his airy manner, she knew to be real. And yet, it was not so very long ago that she would have thought them perfectly natural in a man of his position. Somehow, her old standards were not as fixed as she had thought them. [Pg 271]

"The moment I get back to London," continued Hornby imperturbably, "I'm going to stand myself a bang-up dinner at the Ritz. Then I shall go and see some musical comedy at the Gaiety, and after that, I'll have a slap-up supper at Romano's. England, with all thy faults, I love thee still!" he finished piously.

"I suppose it's being alone with the prairie all these months," said Nora, more to herself than him; "but things that used to seem clever and funny—well, I see them altogether differently now."

"I'm afraid you don't altogether approve of me," he said, quite unabashed.

"I don't think you have much pluck," said Nora, not unkindly.

"Oh, I don't know about that. I've as much as anyone else, I expect, only I don't make a fuss about it."

"Oh, pluck to stand up and let yourself be shot at."—She flushed slightly at the remembrance of Frank standing in this very room in front of the gun in her hand. Would she ever forget his laugh! —"But pluck to do the same monotonous thing day after day, plain, honest, hard work—you haven't got that sort of pluck. You're a failure and the worst of it is, you're not ashamed of it. It seems to fill you with self-satisfaction. Oh, you're incorrigible," she ended with a laugh. [Pg 272]

"I am; let's let it go at that. I suppose there's nothing you want me to take home; I shall be going down to Tunbridge Wells to see mother. Got any messages?"

"I don't know that I have. Eddie has just brought me a couple of letters. I'll have a look at them first."

She went over to the table and picked up Miss Pringle's letter and opened it.

After reading a few lines, she gave a little cry.

"Oh!"

"What's the matter?" asked Marsh.

"What *can* she mean? Listen! 'I've just heard from Mr. Wynne about your good luck and I'm glad to say I have another piece of good news for you.'"

Dropping the letter, she tore open the other. It contained a check. She gave it a quick glance.

"A check for five hundred pounds! Oh, Eddie, listen." She read from Mr. Wynne's letter: "Dear Miss Marsh—I have had several interviews with Mr. Wickham in relation to the late Miss Wickham's estate, and I ventured to represent to him that you had been very badly treated. Now that everything is settled, he wishes me to send you the enclosed check as some recognition of your devoted services to his late aunt—five hundred pounds." [Pg 273]

"That's a very respectable sum," said Marsh, nodding his head sagely.

"I could do with that myself," remarked Hornby.

"I've never had so much money in all my life!"

"But what's the other piece of good news that Miss Stick-in-the-mud has for you?"

"Oh, I quite forgot. Where is it?" Her brother stooped and picked the fallen letter from the floor.

"Thank you. Um-um-um-um-um. Oh, yes, 'Piece of good news for you. I write at once so that you may make your plans accordingly. I told you in my last letter, did I not, of my sister-in-law's sudden death? Now my brother is very anxious that I should make my home with him. So I am leaving Mrs. Hubbard. She wishes me to say that if you care to have my place as her companion, she will be very pleased to have you. I have been with her for thirteen years and she has always treated me like an equal. She is very considerate and there is practically nothing to do but to exercise the dear little dogs. The salary is thirty-five pounds a year.'" [Pg 274]

"But," said Marsh, looking at the envelope in his hand, "the letter is addressed to Miss Marsh. I'd intended to ask you about that; don't they know you're married?"

"No. I haven't told them."

"What a lark!" said Reggie, slapping his knee. "You could go back to Tunbridge Wells, and none of the old frumps would ever know you'd been married at all."

"Why, so I could!" said Nora in a breathless tone. She gave Hornby a strange look and turned toward the window to hide the fact that she had flushed to the roots of her hair.

Her brother gave her a long look.

"Just clear out for a minute, Reg. I want to talk with Nora."

"Right-o!" He disappeared in the direction of the shed.

"Nora, do you *want* to clear out?"

"What on earth makes you think that I do?"

"You gave Reg such a look when he mentioned it."

"I'm only bewildered. Tell me, did Frank know anything about this?"

"My dear, how could he?"

"It's most extraordinary; he was talking about my going away only a moment before you came."

"About your going away? But why?" [Pg 275]

She realized that she had betrayed herself and kept silent.

"Nora, for goodness' sake tell me if there's anything the matter. Can't you see it's now or never? You're keeping something back from me. I could see it all along, ever since I came. Aren't you two getting on well together?"

"Not very," she said in a low, shamed tone.

"Why in heaven's name didn't you let me know."

"I was ashamed."

"But you just now said he was kind to you."

"I have nothing to reproach him with."

"I tell you I felt there was something wrong. I knew you couldn't be happy with him. A girl like you, with your education and refinement, and a man like him—a hired man! Oh, the whole thing would have been ridiculous if it weren't horrible. Not that he's not a good fellow and as straight as they make them, but— Well, thank God, I'm here and you've got this chance."

"Eddie, what do you mean?"

"You're not fit for this life. I mean you've got your chance to go back home to England. For God's sake, take it! In six months' time, all you've gone through here will seem nothing but a hideous dream."

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The expression of her face was so extraordinary, such a combination of fear, bewilderment, and something that was far deeper than dismay, that he stared at her for a moment without speaking.

"Nora, what's the matter!"

"I don't know," she said hoarsely.

But she did, she did.

At his words, the picture of the little shack—her home now—as it had looked the first time she saw it in all its comfortlessness, its untidy squalor, rose before her eyes. And she saw a lonely man clumsily busying himself about the preparation of an illy-cooked meal, and later sitting smoking in the desolate silence. She saw him go forth to his daily toil with all the lightness gone from his step, to return at nightfall, with a heaviness born of more than mere physical fatigue, to the same bleak bareness.

And she saw herself, back at Tunbridge Wells. No longer the mistress, but the underpaid underling. Eating once more off fine old china, at a table sparkling with silver and glass. But the bread was bitter, the bread of the dependent. And she came and went at another's bidding, and the yoke was not easy. She trod once more, round and round, in that little circle which she knew so well. She used to think that the walls would stifle her. How much more would they not stifle her now that she had known this larger freedom?

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"I say," said Reggie's voice from the doorway, "here's someone coming to see you."

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CHAPTER XVII

It was Mrs. Sharp, making her laborious way slowly up the path.

"Why," said Nora, in a low voice, "it's Mrs. Sharp, the wife of our neighbor. Whatever brings her here on foot! She never walks a step if she can help it."

"Good afternoon, Mrs. Sharp," she called.

Mrs. Sharp had apparently come on some sudden impulse. Usually, well as they knew each other by this time, she always made more or less of a toilet before having her husband drive her over. But to-day she had evidently come directly from her work. She wore a battered old skirt and a faded shirt-waist, none too clean. On her head was an old sunbonnet, the strings of which were tied in a hard knot under her fat chin.

"Come right in," said Nora cordially. "You *do* look warm."

"Good afternoon to you, Mrs. Taylor. Yes, I'm all in a perspiration. I've not walked so far—well, goodness alone knows when!"

"This is my brother," said Nora, presenting Eddie.

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"Your brother? Is *that* who it is!"

"Why, you seem surprised."

Mrs. Sharp forbore any explanation for the moment. Sinking heavily into the rocking chair, she accepted with a grateful nod the fan that Nora offered her. There was nothing to do but to give her time to recover her breath. Nora and Eddie sat down and waited.

"I was so anxious," Mrs. Sharp at length managed to say, still panting—whether with exhaustion or emotion, Nora could not tell—between her sentences, "I simply couldn't stay indoors—another minute. I went out to see if I—could catch a sight of Sid. And I walked on, and on. And then I saw the rig what's—outside. And it gave me such a *turn!* I thought it was the inspector. I just had to come—I was that nervous—!"

"But why? Is anything the matter?" asked Nora, completely puzzled.

"You're not going to tell me you don't *know* about it? When Sid and Frank haven't been talking about anything else since Frank found it?"

"Found it? Found what?"

"The weed," said Mrs. Sharp simply.

"You've got it then," said Marsh, with a slight gesture of his head toward the table where Nora's flowers made a bright spot of color. [Pg 280]

"It's worse here, at Taylor's. But we've got it, too."

"What does she mean?" Nora addressed herself to Eddie, abandoning all hope of getting anything out of her friend.

"We can't make out who reported us. It isn't as if we had any enemies," went on Mrs. Sharp gloomily, as if Nora wasn't present, or at least hadn't spoken. "It isn't as if we had any enemies," she repeated. "Goodness knows we've never done anything to anybody."

"Oh, there's always someone to report you. After all, it's not to be wondered at. No one's going to run the risk of letting it get on his own land."

"And she has them in the house as if they were flowers!" exclaimed Mrs. Sharp, addressing the ceiling.

"Eddie, I insist that you tell me what you two are talking about," demanded Nora hotly.

"My dear," said her brother, "these pretty little flowers which you've picked to make your shack look bright and—and homelike, may mean ruin."

"Eddie!"

"You must have heard—why, I remember telling you about it myself—about this mustard, this weed. We farmers in Canada have three enemies to fight: frost, hail and weed." [Pg 281]

Mrs. Sharp confirmed his words with a despairing nod of her head.

"We was hailed out last year," she said. "Lost our whole crop. Never got a dollar for it. And now! If we lose it this year, too—why, we might just as well quit and be done with it."

"When it gets into your crop," Marsh explain for Nora's benefit, "you've got to report it. If you don't, one of the neighbors is sure to. And then they send an inspector along, and if *he* condemns it, why you just have to destroy the whole crop, and all your year's work goes for nothing. You're lucky, in that case, if you've got a bit of money laid by in the bank and can go on till next year when the next crop comes along."

"We've only got a quarter-section and we've got five children. It's not much money you can save then."

"But——" began Nora.

"Are they out with the inspector now?" asked Marsh.

"Yes. He came out from Prentice this morning early."

"This will be a bad job for Frank."

"Yes, but he hasn't got the mouths to feed that we have. I can't think what's to become of us. He can hire out again." [Pg 282]

Nora's face flushed.

"I—I wonder why he hasn't told me anything about it. I asked him, only this morning, what was troubling him. I was sure there was something, but he said not," she said sadly.

"Oh, I guess he's always been in the habit of keeping his troubles to himself, and you haven't taught him different yet."

Nora was about to make a sharp retort, but realizing that her good neighbor was half beside herself with anxiety and nervousness, she said nothing. A fact which the unobservant Eddie noted with approval.

"Well," he said as cheerfully as he could, "you must hope for the best, Mrs. Sharp."

"Sid says we've only got it in one place. But perhaps he's only saying it, so as I shouldn't worry. But you know what them inspectors are; they don't lose nothin' by it. It don't matter to *them* if you starve all winter!"

Suddenly she began to cry. Great sobs wracked her heavy frame. The big tears rolled down her cheeks. Nora had never seen her give way before, even when she talked of the early hardships she had endured, or of the little one she had lost. She was greatly moved, for this good, brave woman who had already suffered so much.

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"Oh, don't—don't cry, dear Mrs. Sharp. After all, it may all turn out right."

"They won't condemn the whole crop unless it's very bad, you know," Marsh reminded her. "Too many people have got their eyes on it; the machine agent and the loan company."

Mrs. Sharp had regained her self-control in sufficient measure to permit of her speaking. She still kept making little dabs at her eyes with a red bandanna handkerchief, and her voice broke occasionally.

"What with the hail that comes and hails you out, and the frost that kills your crop just when you're beginning to count on it, and now the weed!" She had to stop again for a moment. "I can't bear any more. If we lose this crop, I won't go on. I'll make Sid sell out, and we'll go back home. We'll take a little shop somewhere. That's what I wanted to do from the beginning. But Sid—Sid always had his heart set on farming."

"But you couldn't go back now," said Nora, her face aglow, "you couldn't. You never could be happy or contented in a little shop after the life you've had out here. And think; if you'd stayed back in England, you'd have always been at the beck and call of somebody else. And you own your land. You couldn't do that back in England. Every time you come out of your door and look at the growing wheat, aren't you proud to think that it's all yours? I know you are. I've seen it in your face."

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"You don't know all that I've had to put up with. When the children came, only once did I have a doctor. All the rest of the times, Sid was all the help I had. I might as well have been an animal! I wish I'd never left home and come to this country, that I do!"

"How can you say that? Look at your children, how strong and healthy they are. And think what a future they will have. Why, they'll be able to help you both in your work soon. You've given them a chance; they'd never have had a chance back home. You know that."

"Oh, it's all very well for them. They'll have it easy, I know that. Easier than their poor father and mother ever had. But we've had to pay for it all in advance, Sid and me. They'll never know what we paid."

"Ah, but don't you see that it is because you were the first?" said Nora, going over to her and laying a friendly hand upon her arm. Mrs. Sharp was, of course, too preoccupied with her own troubles to realize, even if she had known that the question of Nora's return to England had come up, that her friend was doing some special pleading for herself, against herself. But to her brother, who years before had in a lesser degree gone through the same searching experience, the cause of her warmth was clear. He nodded his approval.

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"It's bitter work, opening up a new country, I realize that," Nora went on, her eyes dark with earnestness.

Unknown to herself, she had a larger audience, for Hornby and Frank stood silently in the open door. Marsh saw them, and shook his head slightly. He wanted Nora to finish.

"What if it is the others who reap the harvest? Don't you really believe that those who break the ground are rewarded in a way that the later comers never dream of? I do."

"She's right there," broke in Marsh. "I shall never forget, Mrs. Sharp, what I felt when I saw my first crop spring up—the thought that never since the world began had wheat grown on that little bit of ground before. Oh, it was wonderful! I wouldn't go back to England now, to live, for anything in the world. I couldn't breathe."

"You're a man. You have the best of it, and all the credit."

"Not with everyone," said Nora. She fell on her knees beside the elder woman's chair and stroked her work-roughened old hand.

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"The outsiders don't know. You mustn't blame them, how could they? It's only those who've lived on the prairie who *could* know that the chief burden of the hardships of opening up a new country falls upon the women. But the men who are the husbands, they know, and in their hearts they give us all credit."

"I guess they do, Mrs. Sharp," said Marsh earnestly.

Mrs. Sharp smiled gratefully on Nora through her tears.

"Thank you for speaking so kindly to me, my dear. I know that you are right in every blessed thing you've said. You must excuse me for being a bit downhearted for the moment. The fact is, I'm that nervous that I hardly know *what* I'm saying. But you've done me no end of good."

"That's right." Nora got slowly to her feet. "Sid and Frank will be here in a minute or two, I am sure."

"And you're perfectly right, both of you," Mrs. Sharp repeated. "I couldn't go back and live in

England again. If we lose our crop, well, we must hang on some way till next year. We shan't starve, exactly. A person's got to take the rough with the smooth; and take it by and large, it's a good country."

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"Ah, now you're talking more like yourself, the self that used to cheer me up when——"

Turning, she saw her husband standing in the doorway.

"Frank!"

He was looking at her with quite a new expression. How long had he been there? Had he heard all she had been saying to Mrs. Sharp, carried away by the emotion aroused by the secret conflict within her own heart? She both hoped and feared that he had.

"Where's Sid?" said Mrs. Sharp, starting to her feet.

"Why, he's up at your place. Hulloo, Ed. Saw you coming along in the rig earlier in the morning. But I was surprised to find Reg here. Didn't recognize him so far away in his store clothes."

"Must have been a pleasant surprise for you," said Hornby with conviction.

"What's happened? Tell me what's happened."

"Mrs. Sharp came on here because she was too anxious to stay at home," Nora explained.

"Oh, you're all right."

"We are?" Mrs. Sharp gave a sobbing gasp of relief.

"Only a few acres got to go. That won't hurt you."

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"Thank God for that! And it's goin' to be the best crop we ever had. It's the finest country in the world!" Her face was beaming.

"You'd better be getting back," warned Taylor. "Sid's taken the inspector up to give him some dinner."

"He hasn't!" said Mrs. Sharp indignantly. "If that isn't just like a man." She made a gesture condemning the sex. "It's a mercy there's plenty in the house. But I must be getting along right away," she bustled.

"But you mustn't think of walking all that way back in the hot sun," expostulated Nora. "There's Eddie's rig. Reggie, here, will drive you over."

"Oh, thank you, kindly. I'm not used to walking very much, you know, and I'd be all tuckered out by the time I got back home. Good-by, all. Good afternoon, Mrs. Taylor."

"Good afternoon. Reggie, you won't mind driving Mrs. Sharp back. It's only just a little over a mile."

"Not a bit of it," said Hornby good-naturedly.

"I'll come and help you put the mare in," said Marsh, starting to follow Hornby and Mrs. Sharp down the path.

"I guess it's a relief to you, now you know," he called back to his brother-in-law.

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"Terrible. I want to have a talk with you presently, Ed. I'll go on out with him, I guess," he said, turning to his wife.

She nodded silently. She was grateful to him for leaving her alone for a time. They would have much to say to each other a little later.

"Hold on, Ed, I'm coming."

"Right you are!"

He ran lightly down the path where his brother-in-law stood waiting for him.

She stood for a long moment looking down at the innocent-looking little blossoms on her table. And they could cause such heartbreak and desolation, ranking, as engines of destruction, with the frost and the hail! Could make such seasoned and tried women as Mrs. Sharp weep and bring the gray look of apprehension into the eyes of a man like her husband. Those innocent-looking little flowers!

What must he have felt as he saw her arranging them so light-heartedly in her pudding-dish that morning. And yet, rather than mar her pleasure, he had choked back the impulse to speak. Yes, that was like him. For a moment they blurred as she looked at them. She checked her inclination to throw them into the stove, to burn them to ashes so that they could work their evil spells no more. Later on, she would do so. But she wanted them there until he returned.

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She looked about the little room. Yes, it *was* pretty and homelike, deserving all the nice things people said about it. And what a real pleasure she had had in transforming it, from the dreadful little place it was when she first saw it, into what it was now. Not that she could ever have worked the miracle alone.

She smiled sadly to herself. How all her thoughts, like homing pigeons, had the one goal!

And how proud he was of it all. With what delighted, almost childlike interest, he had watched each little change. And how he had acquiesced in every suggestion and helped her to plan and carry out the things she could not have done alone.

She lived again those long winter evenings when, snug and warm, the grim cruelty of the storms shut out, she had read aloud to him while he worked on making the chairs.

How long would it keep its prettiness with no woman's eye to keep its jealous watch on it? The process of reversion to its old desolation would be gradual. The curtains, the bright ribands, the cushions would slowly become soiled and faded. And there would be no one here to renew them. For a moment, the thought of asking Mrs. Sharp to look after them came into her mind. But, no. She certainly had enough to do. And, besides—the thought thrilled her with delight—*he* would not like having anyone else to touch them!

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And she? She would be back in that old life where such simple little things were a commonplace, a matter of course. And what interest would they be to her? She could see herself ripping the ribands from an old hat to tie back curtains for Mrs. Hubbard! Certainly that excellent lady would be astonished if she suggested doing anything of the sort, and small wonder. She hired the proper people to keep her house in order just as she was going to hire her.

She found it in her heart to be sorry for Mrs. Hubbard. She had always had her money. The joy of these little miracles of contrivance had never been hers. She had bought her home. She had never, in all her pampered life, made one.

Home! What a desolating word it could be to the homeless. She knew. Since her far-off childhood, she had never called a place 'home' till now. And just as the word began to take on a new meaning, she was going to leave it! Had anyone told her a few short months ago, on the night that she had first seen what she had inwardly called a hovel, that she would ever leave it with any faintest feeling of regret, she would have called him mad. Regret! why the thought of leaving tore her very heartstrings.

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What if it had been only a few short months that had passed since then? One's life is not measured by the ticking of a clock, but by emotion and feeling. She had crowded more emotion into these few short months than in all the rest of her dull, uneventful life put together.

Fear, terror, hatred, murderous rage, bitter humiliation, she had felt them all within the small compass of these four walls. And greatest of all—why try to deceive her own heart any longer—here she had known love. She had fought off the acknowledgment of this the crowning experience and humiliation as long as she could. She had called on her pride, that pride which had never before failed her. And now, to herself, she had to acknowledge that she was beaten.

They were all against her. Her own brother had spoken, only a few moments ago, of her marriage as horrible. "A girl like you and a hired man!" She could hear him now. And *he* had spoken of her leaving as a matter of course. He couldn't have done it if he had cared. He liked the comforts that a woman brings to a house, the little touches that no man's hand can give, that a woman, even as unskillful as she, brings about instinctively, that was all. Almost any other woman could do as well. He did not prize her for herself.

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And she would go back to England and, as Hornby had gleefully said, no one need ever know. She would have a place, on sufferance, in other people's homes. The only change that the year would have made in her life would be that the check in her pocket, safely invested, might save her eventually, when she was too old to serve as a companion, from being dependant on actual charity. And to all outward intents and purposes, the year would be as if it had never been.

"In six months, all you've gone through here will seem nothing but a hideous dream," her brother had promised her. Was there ever a man since the world began that understood a woman! A dream! The only time in her life that she had really lived. No, all the rest of her life might be of the stuff that dreams are made on, but not this. And like a sleep-walker, dead to all sensation, she must go through with it.

And she was not yet thirty. All of her father's family—and she was physically the daughter of her father, not of her mother—lived to such a great age. In all human probability there would be at least fifty years of life left to her. Fifty years with all that made life worth living behind one!

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She supposed he would eventually get a divorce. She remembered to have heard that such things were easy out here, not like it was in England. And he was a man who would be sure to marry again, he would want a family.

And it was some other woman who would be the mother of his children!

The wave of passion that swept her now, made up of bitter regret, of longing and of jealousy, overwhelmed her as never before.

She had been pacing the room up and down, up and down, stopping now and then to touch some little familiar object with a touch that was a caress.

But at this last thought, she sank into a chair and buried her face in her hands.

The storm of weeping which shook her had nearly spent itself, when she heard steps coming

toward the house, a step that her heart had known for many a day. Drying her eyes quickly, she went to the window and made a pretense of looking out that he might not see her tear-stained face. She made a last call on her pride and strength to carry her through the coming interview. He should never know what leaving cost her; that she promised herself.

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CHAPTER XVIII

"Ed drove over with Reg and Emma; I guess he won't be very long. There was something he wanted to say to old man Sharp that he'd forgot about."

"Then you didn't get your talk with him?"

She was glad of that. It was better to have their own talk first. But as it had been *he* who had broached the subject of her leaving, it was he who must reopen it.

"No, but I guess anything I've got to say to him will keep till he gets back. Ed's thinking of buying a clearing-machine that's for sale over Prentice way."

"Yes, he told me."

Without turning her head, she could tell that he was looking around for the matches. He never could remember that they were kept in a jar over on the shelf back of the stove. He was going to smoke his pipe, of course. When men were nervous about anything they always flew to tobacco. Women were denied that poor consolation. But she, too, felt the necessity of having something to occupy her hands. She went back to the table, and taking some of Frank's thick woolen socks from her basket, sat down and began mechanically to darn them. She purposely placed herself so that he could only see her profile. Even then, he would see that her eyes were still red; she hadn't had time to bathe them.

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"I suppose I look a sight, but poor Mrs. Sharp was so upset! She broke down and cried and of course I've been crying, too. I'm so thankful it's turned out all right for her. Poor thing, I never saw her in such a state!"

"They've got five children to feed. I guess it would make a powerful lot of difference to them," he said quietly.

"I wish you'd told me all about it before. I felt that something was worrying you, and I didn't know what." There was a pause. "Why *didn't* you tell me?"

"If I saved the crop, there didn't seem any use fussing, and if I didn't, you'd know soon enough."

"How could you bear to let me put those dreadful flowers here in the house?" she said, pointing to the bowl on the table.

"Oh, I guess I didn't mind, if it gave you any pleasure. You didn't know they was only a weed and a poisonous one for us farmers. You thought them darned pretty."

"That was very kind of you, Frank," said Nora. Her voice shook a little in spite of her effort to control it.

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"I guess it's queer that a darned little flower like that should be able to do so much damage."

That subject exhausted, there came another pause. He was very evidently waiting her lead. Could Eddie have told him anything about the news from England? No, he hadn't had any opportunity. Besides it would have been very unlike Eddie, who, as a general rule, had a supreme talent for minding his own affairs.

"How did it happen that you didn't tell me that you had written to Eddie?"

"I guess I forgot."

She waited a few moments to make sure that her voice was quite steady:

"Frank, Eddie brought me some letters from home—from England, I mean—to-day. I've had an offer of a job back in England."

He got up slowly and went over to the corner where the broom hung to get some straws to run through the mouthpiece of his pipe. His face was turned from her, so that she could not see that he had closed his eyes for a moment and that his mouth was drawn with pain.

When he turned he had resumed his ordinary expression. His voice was perfectly steady when he spoke:

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"An offer of a job? Gee! I guess you'll jump at that."

"It's funny it should have come just when you had been talking of my going away."

"Very."

Not even a comment. Oh, why didn't he say that he would be glad to have her gone, and be done

with it! Anything, almost, would be easier to bear than this total lack of interest. She tried another tack.

"Have you any—any objection?"

"I guess it wouldn't make a powerful lot of difference to you if I had." He could actually smile, his good-natured, indulgent smile, which she knew so well.

"What makes you think that?"

"Oh, I guess you only stayed on here because you had to."

Nora's work dropped in her lap.

"Is life always like that?" she said with bitter sadness. "The things you've wanted so dreadfully seem only to bring you pain when they come."

He gave her a swift glance, but went on smoking quietly. She went over to the window again and stood looking out at the stretch of prairie. Presently she spoke in a low voice, but her words were addressed as much to herself as to him:

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"Month after month, this winter, I used to sit here looking out at the prairie. Sometimes I wanted to scream at the top of my voice. I felt that I must break that awful silence or go mad. There were times when the shack was like a prison. I thought I should never escape. I was hemmed in by the snow and the cold and the stillness; cut off from everything and everybody, from all that had been the world I knew."

"Are you going to quit right now with Ed?" he asked gently.

Nora went slowly back to her chair. "You seem in a great hurry to be rid of me," she said, with the flicker of a smile.

"Well, I guess we ain't made a great success of our married life, my girl." He went over to the stove to knock the ashes from his pipe. "It's rum, when you come to figure it out," he said, when it was once more lighted; "I thought I could make you do everything I wanted, just because I was bigger and stronger. It sure did look like I held a straight flush. And you beat me."

"I?" said Nora in astonishment.

"Why, sure. You don't mean to say you didn't know *that*?"

"I don't know at all what you mean."

"I guess I was pretty ignorant about women," his began pacing up and down the floor as he talked. "I guess I didn't know how strong a woman could be. You was always givin' way; you done everything I told you. And, all the time, you was keeping something back from me that I couldn't get at. Whenever I thought I was goin' to put my hand on you—zip! You was away again. I guess I found I'd only caught hold of a shadow."

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"I don't know what more you expected. I didn't know you wanted anything more!"

"I guess I wanted love," he said in a tone so low that she barely caught it.

He stood over by the table, looking down on her from his great height. His face was flushed, but his eyes were steady and unashamed.

"You!"

She looked at him in absolute consternation. Her breath came in hurried gasps. But her heart sang in her breast and the little pathetic droop of her mouth disappeared. Her telltale eyes dropped on her work. Not yet, not yet; she was greedy to hear more.

"I know you now less well than when you'd been only a week up to Ed's." He resumed his pacing up and down. "I guess I've lost the trail. I'm just beating round, floundering in the bush."

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"I never knew you wanted love," she said softly.

"I guess I didn't know it until just lately, either."

"I suppose parting's always rather painful," she said with just the beginning of a little smile creeping round the corners of her lips.

"If you go back—*when* you go back," he corrected himself, "to the old country, I guess—I guess you'll never want to come back."

"Perhaps you'll come over to England yourself, one of these days. If you only have a couple of good years, you could easily shut up the place and run over for the winter," she said shyly.

"I guess that would be a dangerous experiment. You'll be a lady in England. I guess I'd still be only the hired man."

"You'd be my husband."

"N-o-o-o," he said, with a shake of the head. "I guess I wouldn't chance it."

She tried another way. She was sure of her happiness now; she could play with it a little longer.

"You'll write to me now and then, and tell me how you're getting on, won't you?"

"Will you care to know?" he asked quickly.

"Why, yes, of course I shall."

"Well," he said, throwing back his head proudly, "I'll write and tell you if I'm making good. If I ain't, I guess I shan't feel much like writing." [Pg 302]

"But you *will* make good, Frank. I know you well enough for that."

"Do you?" His tone was grateful.

"I have learned to—to respect you during these months we've lived together. You have taught me a great deal. All sorts of qualities which I used to think of great value seem unimportant to me now. I have changed my ideas about many things."

"We have each learned something, I guess," he said generously.

Nora gave him a grateful glance. He stood for a moment at the far end of the room and watched her roll up the socks she had just darned. How neat and deft she was. After all, there *was* something in being a lady, as Mrs. Sharp had said. Neither she nor Gertie, both capable women, could do things in quite the same way that Nora did.

Oh, why had she come into his life at all! She had given him the taste for knowledge, for better things of all sorts; and now she was going away, going away forever. He had no illusions about her ever returning. Not she, once she had escaped from a life she hated. Had she not just said as much when she said that the shack had seemed like a prison to her? [Pg 303]

And now, in place of going on in the old way that had always seemed good enough to him before he knew anything better, mulling about, getting his own meals, with only one thought, one ambition in the world—the success of his crops and the acquisition of more land that he might some day in the dim future have a few thousands laid by—he would always be wanting something he could never get without her: more knowledge of the things that made life fuller and wider and broader, the things that she prized and had known from her childhood.

It was cruel and unfair of her to have awakened the desire in him only to abandon him. To have held the cup of knowledge to his lips for one brief instant and then leave him to go through life with his thirst unslaked! Not that she was intentionally cruel. No, he thought he knew all of her little faults of temper and of pride by this. Her heart was too kindly to let her wound him knowingly, witness her tenderness to poor Mrs. Sharp only this afternoon. But it hurt, none the less. She had said that she had not known he wanted love. How should she have guessed it?

But the real thing that tortured him most was the fact that he wanted her, her, her. She had been his, his woman. No other woman in this broad earth could take her place. [Pg 304]

A little sound like a groan escaped him.

"You'll think of me sometimes, my girl, won't you?" he said huskily.

"I don't suppose I shall be able to help it." She smiled at him over her shoulder, as she crossed the room to restore her basket to its place.

"I was an ignorant, uneducated man. I didn't know how to treat you properly. I wanted to make you happy, but I didn't seem to know just how to do it."

"You've never been unkind to me, Frank. You've been very patient with me!"

"I guess you'll be happier away from me, though. And I'll be able to think that you're warm and comfortable and at home, and that you've plenty to eat."

"Do you think that's all I want?" she suddenly flashed at him.

He gave her a quick glance and looked away immediately.

"I couldn't expect you to stay on here, not when you've got a chance of going back to the old country. This life is all new to you. You know that one."

"Oh, yes, I know it: I should think I did!" She gave a little mirthless laugh, and went over to her chair again. [Pg 305]

"At eight o'clock every morning a maid will bring me tea and hot water. And I shall get up, and I shall have breakfast. And, presently, I shall interview the cook, and I shall order luncheon and dinner. And I shall brush the coats of Mrs. Hubbard's little dogs and take them for a walk on the common. All the paths on the common are asphalted, so that elderly gentlemen and lady's companions shan't get their feet wet."

"Gee, what a life!"

She hardly gave him time for his exclamation. As she went on, mirth, scorn, hatred and dismay came into her voice, but she was unconscious of it. For the moment, everything else was forgotten but the vivid picture which memory conjured up for her and which she so graphically described.

"And then, I shall come in and lunch, and after luncheon I shall go for a drive: one day we will turn to the right and one day we will turn to the left. And then I shall have tea. And then I shall go out again on the neat asphalt paths to give the dogs another walk. And then I shall change my dress and come down to dinner. And after dinner I shall play bezique with my employer; only I must take care not to beat her, because she doesn't like being beaten. And at ten o'clock I shall go to bed."

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A wave of stifling recollection choked her for a moment so that she could not go on. Presently she had herself once more in hand.

"At eight o'clock next morning a maid will bring in my tea and hot water, and the day will begin again. Each day will be like every other day. And, can you believe it, there are hundreds of women in England, strong and capable, with red blood in their veins, who would be eager to get this place which is offered to me. Almost a lady—and thirty-five pounds a year!"

She did not look toward him, or she would have seen a look of wonder, of comprehension and of hope pass in turn over his face.

"It seems a bit different from the life you've had here," he said, looking out through the open doorway as if to point his meaning.

"And you," she said, turning her eyes upon him, "you will be clearing the scrub, cutting down trees, plowing the land, sowing and reaping. Every day you will be fighting something, frost, hail or weed. You will be fighting and I will know that you must conquer in the end. Where was wilderness will be cultivated land. And who knows what starving child may eat the bread that has been made from the wheat that you have grown! *My* life will be ineffectual and utterly useless, while yours—"

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"What do you mean? Nora, Nora!" he said more to himself than to her.

"While I was talking to Mrs. Sharp just now, I didn't know what I was saying. I was just trying to comfort her when she was crying. And it seemed to me as if someone else was speaking. And I listened to myself. I thought I hated the prairie through the long winter months, and yet, somehow, it has taken hold of me. It was dreary and monotonous, and yet, I can't tear it out of my heart. There's beauty and a romance about it which fills my very soul with longing."

"I guess we all hate the prairie sometimes. But when you've once lived on it, it ain't easy to live anywhere else."

"I know the life now. It's not adventurous and exciting, as they think back home. For men and women alike, it's the same hard work from morning till night, and I know it's the women who bear the greater burden."

"The men go into the towns, they have shooting, now and then, and the changing seasons bring variety in their work; but for the women it's always the same weary round: cooking, washing, sweeping, mending, in regular and ceaseless rotation. And yet it's all got a meaning. We, too, have our part in opening up the country. We are its mothers, and the future is in us. We are building up the greatness of the nation. It needs *our* courage and strength and hope, and because it needs them, they come to us. Oh, Frank, I can't go back to that petty, narrow life! What have you done to me?"

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"I guess if I asked you to stay now, you'd stay," he said hoarsely.

"You said you wanted love."—The lovely color flooded her face.—"Didn't you see? Love has been growing in me slowly, month by month, and I wouldn't confess it. I told myself I hated you. It's only to-day, when I had the chance of leaving you forever, that I knew I couldn't live without you. I'm not ashamed any more. Frank, my husband, I love you."

He made a stride forward as if to take her in his arms, and then stopped short, smitten by a recollection.

"I—I guess I've loved you from the beginning, Nora," he stammered.

She had risen to her feet and stood waiting him with shining eyes.

"But why do you say it as if— What *is* it, Frank?"

"I can't ask you to stay on now; I guess you'll have to take that job in England, for a while, anyway."

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"Why?"

"The inspector's condemned my whole crop; I'm busted."

"Oh, why didn't you tell me!"

"I just guess I couldn't. I made up my mind when I married you that I'd make good. I couldn't expect you to see that it was just bad luck. Anyone may get the weed in his crop. But, I guess a man oughtn't to have bad luck. The odds are that it's his own fault if he has."

"Ah, now I understand about your sending for Eddie."

"I wrote to him when I knew I'd been reported."

"But what are you going to do?"

"It's all right about me; I can hire out again. It's *you* I'm thinking of. I felt pretty sure you wouldn't go back to Ed's. I don't fancy you taking a position as lady help. I didn't know what was going to become of you, my girl. And when you told me of the job you'd been offered in England, I thought I'd have to let you go."

"Without letting me know you were in trouble!"

"Why, if I wasn't smashed up, d'you think I'd *let* you go? By God, I wouldn't! I'd have kept you. By God, I'd have kept you!"

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"Then you're going to give up the land," she made a sweeping gesture which took in the prospect without.

"No," he said, shaking his head. "I guess I can't do that. I've put too much work in it. And I've got my back up, now. I shall hire out for the summer, and next winter I can get work lumbering. The land's my own, now. I'll come back in time for the plowing next year."

He had been gazing sadly out of the door as he spoke. He turned to her now ready to bring her what comfort he could. But in place of the tearful face he had expected to see, he saw a face radiant with joy and the light of love. In her hand was a little slip of colored paper which she held out to him.

"Look!"

"What's that?"

"The nephew of the lady I was with so long—Miss Wickham, you know—has made me a present of it. Five hundred pounds. That's twenty-five hundred dollars, isn't it? You can take the quarter-section you've wanted so long, next to this one. You can get all the machinery you need. And"—she gave a little, happy, mirthful laugh—"you can get some cows! I've learned to do so many things, I guess I can learn to milk, if you'll teach me and be very, very patient about it. Anyway, it's yours to do what you like with. Now, will you keep me?"

[Pg 311]

"Oh, my girl, how shall I ever be able to repay you!"

"Good Heavens, I don't want thanks! There's nothing in all the world so wonderful as to be able to give to one you love. Frank, won't you kiss me?"

He folded her in his arms.

"I guess it's the first time you ever asked me to do that!"

"I'm sure I'm the happiest woman in all the world!" she said happily.

As they stood in the doorway, he with his arm about her, they saw Eddie coming up the path toward them.

Marsh's honest face, never a good mask for hiding his feelings, wore an expression of bewildered astonishment at their lovelike attitude.

"It's all right, old dear," said Nora with a happy laugh; "don't try to understand it, you're only a man. But I'm not going back to England, to Mrs. Hubbard and her horrid little dogs; I'm going to stay right here. This overgrown baby has worked on my feelings by pretending that he needs me."

"And now, if you'll be good enough to hurry Reggie a little, we'll all have some supper; it's long past the proper time."

[Pg 312]

And as she bustled about her preparations, her brother heard her singing one of the long-ago songs of their childhood.

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