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[Frontispiece: The Cow Puncher]

The Cow Puncher

By

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[These long rides afforded her many side-lights on the remarkable nature of her escort.](#)

["You aren't talking to-day ... what's wrong?"](#)

["There is only one answer, Dave. Because I love you."](#)

THE COW PUNCHER

CHAPTER ONE

The shadows of the spruce trees fell north-eastward, pointing long, cool fingers across belts of undulating prairie, or leaning lazily against the brown foothills. Like an incandescent globe the afternoon sun hung in the bowl of a cloudless heaven, filmy with heat, but the hot rays were met

by the high altitude of the ranch country and lost their force like a blow half struck. And among the spruce trees it was cool and green, and clear blue water rippled over beds of shining gravel.

The ranch buildings lay a little to the rear, as though the trees stood sentinel between them and the prairies. The house was of round straight logs; the shingles of the squat roof were cupped and blistered with the suns of many summers. Refuse loitered about the open door; many empty tins; a leaky barrel, with missing hoops; boxes, harness, tangled bits of wire. Once there had been a fence; a sort of picket fence of little saplings, but wild bronchos had kicked it to pieces and range steers had straggled unscarred across its scattered remnants.

Forward, and to the left, was the corral; mill slabs on end, or fences of lodge-pole pine; a corner somewhat covered in, offering vague protection from the weather. The upper poles were worn thin with the cribbing of many horses.

The sunlight bathed the scene; nursed it in a soft, warm silence. The desertion seemed absolute; the silence was the silence of the unspoken places. But suddenly it was broken by a stamping in the covered part of the corral, and a man's voice saying, "Hip, there; whoa, you cayuse; get under your saddle! Sleepin' against a post all day, you sloppy-eye. Hip, come to it!"

Horse and rider dashed into the sunlight. The boy—for he was no more than a boy—sat the beast as though born to it, his lithe frame taking every motion of his mount as softly as a good boat rides the sea. His red shirt and thick hairy schaps could not disguise the lean muscularity of his figure; the broad felt hat, and the revolver at his belt, gave just the touch of romance. With a yell at his horse he snatched the hat from his head, turning to the sun a smooth, brown face and a mane of dark hair, and slapped the horse across the flank with his crumpled headgear. At the signal the animal sprang into the air, then dashed at a gallop down the roadway, bearing the boy as unconcerned as a flower on its stem.

Suddenly he brought his horse to a stop; swung about, and rode back at a gentle canter. A few yards from the house he again spurred him to a gallop, and, leaning far down by the animal's side, deftly picked a bottle from among the grass. Then he circled about, repeating this operation as often as his eye fell on a bottle, until he had half-a-dozen; then down the road again, carefully setting a bottle on each post of the fence that skirted it to the right.

Again he came back to the house, but, when he turned, his eye was on the row of posts, and his right hand lay on the grip of his revolver. Again his sharp yell broke the silence and the horse dashed forward as though shot from a gun. Down the road they went until within a rod of the first bottle; then there was a flash in the sunlight, and to the clatter of the horse's hoofs came the crack-crack of the revolver. Two bottles shattered to fragments, but four remained intact, and the boy rode back, muttering and disappointed.

He reasoned with his horse as he rode. "'Taint no use, you ol' slop-eye; a fellow can't get the bede if he ain't got the fillin'; cooked meals an' decent chuck. I could plug 'em six out o' six—you know that, you ol' flop-ears; don't you argue about it, neither—when I'm right inside my belt I smash 'em six out o' six, but I ain't right, an' you know it. You don't know nothin' about it; you never had a father, leastways, you never had to be responsible for one.... Well, it's comin' to a finish—a damn lame finish, you know that. You know—"

But he had reloaded his revolver and set up two more bottles. This time he broke four, and was better pleased with himself. As he rode back his soliloquy was broken by a strange sound from beyond the belt of trees. The horse pricked up his ears, and the boy turned in the saddle to listen.

"Jumpin' crickets, what's loose?" he ejaculated. He knew every sound of the foothill country, but this was strange to him. A kind of snort, a sort of hiss; mechanical in its regularity, startling in its strangeness, it came across the valley with the unbroken rhythm of a watch-tick.

"Well, I guess it won't eat us," he ventured at last. "We'll just run it down and perhaps poke a hole in it." So saying, he cantered along the road which skirted the spruce trees, crossed the little stream and swung up the hill on the farther side.

He was half way up when a turn in the road brought him into sudden sight of the strange visitor. It was the first he had seen, but he knew it at once, for the fame of the automobile, then in its single-cylinder stage, had already spread into the farthest ranching country. The horse was less well informed. Whether or not in that moment he recognized the great rival of his race must be left to some analyst of horse character, but he bucked and kicked in rage and terror. But the boy was conscious not so much of the horse as of two bright eyes turned on him in frank and surprised admiration.

"What horsemanship!" she exclaimed, but the words had scarce left her lips when they were followed by a cry of alarm. For the car had taken a sudden turn from the road and plunged into a growth of young poplars that fringed the hillside. The oldish man at the wheel gave it a violent wrench, but left his motor in gear, and the car half slid, half plowed its way into semi-vertical position among the young trees. The two occupants were thrown from their seat; the girl fell clear, but her father was less fortunate.

In an instant the boy had flung himself from his horse, dropping the reins to the ground, and

the animal, although snorting and shivering, had no thought of disgracing his training by breaking his parole. With quick, ungainly strides the boy brought himself to the upturned machine. It was curious that he should appear to such disadvantage on his feet. In the saddle he was grace personified.

For a moment he looked somewhat stupidly upon the wreck. Had it been a horse or a steer he would have known the procedure, but this experience was new to his life. Besides, there were strangers here. He had no fear of strangers when they wore schaps and coloured handkerchiefs, but a girl in a brown sweater and an oldish man with a white collar were creatures to be approached with caution. The oldish man was lying on the ground, with a leg pinned under the car, and Brown Sweater raised his head against her knee and pressed his cheeks with small white fingers and looked at the boy with bright grey eyes and said, "Well, aren't you going to do anything?"

That brought him back. "Sure," he said, springing to her side. "Whada ye' want me to do?"

"I am afraid my leg is broken," said the man, speaking calmly notwithstanding his pain. "Can you get the jack out of the tool box and raise the car?"

The girl pointed to the box, and in a moment he had the jack in his hand. But it was a new tool to him and he fumbled with it stupidly. The handle would not fit, and when it did fit it operated the wrong way.

"Oh, let me have it," she cried, impatiently. In a moment she had it set under the frame of the car and was plying the handle up and down with rapid strokes. The machine began to groan with the pressure, and the boy looked on, helpless and mortified. He was beginning to realize that there were more things in the world than riding a horse, and shooting bottles. He felt a sudden desire to be of great service. And just now he could be of no service whatever.

But the foot of the jack began to sink in the soft earth, and the girl looked up helplessly. "It won't lift it," she said. "What shall we do?"

It was his chance. He was eighteen, and his wild, open life had given him muscles of steel. "Here," he said, roughly, "move his leg when I get it clear." He turned his back to the machine and crouched down until he could get his hands under the steel frame. Then he lifted. The car was in a somewhat poised position, and he was able to swing it up far enough to release the injured leg.

"Very good, my boy," said the man. "That was a wonderful lift. The leg is broken—compound. Can you get some way of moving me to shelter? I will pay you well."

The last words were unfortunate. Hospitality in the ranching country is not bought and sold.

"You can't pay me nothin'," he said rudely. "But I can bring a light wagon, if you can ride in that, and put you up at the ranch. The old man's soused," he added, as an afterthought, "but it's better than sleepin' out. I won't be long."

He was back at his horse, and in a moment they heard the clatter of hoofs galloping down the hillside.

The girl sat on the ground and rested her father's head in her lap. Tears made her bright eyes brighter still.

"Don't cry, Reenie," he said, gently. "We are very lucky to be so close to help. Of course, I'll be laid up for awhile, but it will give you a chance to see ranch life as it really is"—He winced with pain, but continued, "I fancy we shall find it plain and unveneered. What a horseman! If I could run an automobile like he does a horse we should not be here. Did you notice that I didn't release the clutch? Just ambled into this predicament—embraced it, I might say."

"He's strong," she said. "But he's rude."

"The best fields for muscle are often poor schools for manners," he answered. "But manners are no substitute for hospitality, and he seems to have that, all right. It is something that belongs to the open country, the big, open country. In cities they *entertain*, but in the ranching country they, why, there isn't any word for it, but you will see for yourself."

He was soon back with a wagon and a stretcher. He avoided the eyes of his guests, but quickly and gently enough he placed the injured man on the stretcher. "I guess you'll have to take the feet," he said. The words were for the girl, although he did not look at her. "I could hustle him myself, but it might hurt 'im."

But the injured man interrupted. "I beg your pardon," he said, "that I did not introduce my daughter. I am Doctor Hardy—this is my daughter, Irene, Mr.—?"

"They don't call me mister," said the boy. "Misters is scarce in these woods. My name is Elden—Dave Elden."

He was for dropping it at that, but the girl came up with extended hand. He took it shyly, but

it made him curiously bold. "I'm glad to meet you, Mr. Elden," she said.

"I'm glad to meet you, too," he answered. "Misses is scarcer than misters in this neck o' the woods."

Carefully they lifted the injured man into the wagon, and Dave drove to the ranch building with an unwonted caution that must have caused strange misgivings in the hearts of his team.

"It ain't much of a place," he said, as they pulled up at the door. "I guess you can see that for yourself," he added, with a grin. "You see, there's just Dad and me, and he's soused most of the time, and I handle a lasso better'n a scrubbin' brush." He was already losing his shyness. "Now, you take the feet again. Steady, don't break any more bones. Look out for that barrel hoop. This way, now."

He led into the old ranch house, kicking the door wider open with his heel as he passed. A musty smell fell on the senses of the girl as she entered, and she was conscious of the buzzing of innumerable flies. A partition from east to west divided the house, and another partition from north to south divided the northern half. In the north-east room they set the stretcher on the floor.

"Now," said the boy, "I'm goin' for the doctor. It's forty miles to town, and it'll likely be mornin' before I'm back, but I'll sure burn the trail. You'll have to make the best of it," he continued, impersonally addressing the much-spotted window. "There's grub in the house, and you won't starve—that is, if you can cook." (This was evidently for Irene. There was a note in it that suggested the girl might have her limitations.) "Dig in to anythin' in sight. And I hope your father's leg won't hurt very much." Irene wondered afterwards why the hope concerning her father should have been expressed to her. Did he already feel—what was it?—better acquainted with her?

"Oh, I'll stand it," said Doctor Hardy, with some cheerfulness. "We medical men become accustomed to suffering—in other people. You are very kind. My daughter may remain in this room, I suppose? There is no one else?"

"No one but the old man," he answered. "He's asleep in the next room, safe till mornin'. I'll be back by that time. That's my bed," indicating a corner. "Make yourselves at home." He lounged through the door and they heard his spurs clanking across the hard earth.

The girl's first thought was to assure as much comfort for her father as the circumstances would permit. She removed his boot and stocking, and, under his direction, slit the leg of his trousers above the injury. It was bleeding a little. In the large room of the house she found a pail with water, and she bathed the wound, wiping it with her handkerchief, and mingling a tear or two with the warm blood that dripped from it.

"You're good stuff," her father said, pressing the fingers of her unoccupied hand. "Now, if you could find a clean cloth to bandage it—"

She looked about the place, somewhat hopelessly. Her expedition to the main part of the house, when she had found the water pail, had not reassured her as to the housekeeping of the Eldens. Her father read her perplexity.

"It seems as though you would be in charge here for awhile, Reenie," he said, "so you will save time by getting acquainted at once with your equipment. Look the house over and see what you have to work with."

"Well, I can commence here," she answered. "This is Dave's room. I suppose I should say Mr. Elden's, but—what was it he said about 'mistering'? It would be splendid if it were cleaned up," she continued, with kindling enthusiasm. "These bare logs, bare floors, bare rafters—we've got back to essentials, anyway. And that's his bed." She surveyed a framework of spruce poles, on which lay an old straw mattress and some very grey blankets. "I suppose he is very tired when he goes to bed," she said, drolly, as though that could be the only explanation of sleep amid such surroundings. "And the walls give one a clue to the artistic side of his nature." A poster advertising a summer fair, with a prodigious bull occupying the centre of the picture, hung on one wall, and across from it a lithograph of a young woman, with very bright clothing and very alabaster skin and very décollete costume tendered a brand of beer with the assurance that it goes to the spot. "I ought to drape it," she said, and the curl on her lip showed smooth white teeth.

"I was forgetting I have to find a bandage for you," she suddenly remembered. "There's his trunk; it might produce something, but we will save it for a last resort. Now I will explore this main room, which I suppose is the kitchen, dining room, living room, everything."

In the south end of the larger room stood a fireplace, crudely made of slabs of native rock. The fires of many winters had crumbled the rock, so that it had fallen in in places, and was no longer employed for its original purpose. A very rusty and greasy stove now occupied the space immediately in front of the fireplace, the stove-pipe leading into the ample but tottering chimney. Near the stove was a bench supporting a tin wash-basin, a wooden pail, and certain fragments of soap—evidently all the equipment necessary for the simple ablutions of the Elden household. The

remnant of a grain bag, with many evidences of use and abuse, performed the functions of towel, and a broken piece of looking-glass gave the faintest intimation that a strain of fundamental relationship links the sexes. By the western wall was a table, with numerous dishes; and to the wall itself had been nailed wooden boxes—salmon and tomato cases—now containing an assortment of culinary supplies. A partially used sack of flour, and another of rolled oats, leaned against the wall, and a trap-door in the floor gave promise of further resources beneath. There was a window in the east and another in the west, both open and unscreened; myriads of flies gave the only touch of life to the dismal scene.

Irene looked it all over, then leaned against the window sill and laughed. Her father had brought her west for holidays with the promise of changed surroundings and new experiences, but he had promised her no such delight as this. With the Elden kitchen still photographed in her mind she called up the picture of her own city home; the green lawn, faultlessly trimmed by a time-serving gardener; the floral borders, the hedges; the two stately trees; the neat walk, the wide verandah, the dim, mysterious hall; the rooms, heavily shaded to save the rich carpets; the order, the precision, the fixedness, the this-sits-here and that-stands-there-ness—the flatness and emptiness and formality of it all, and she turned again to the Elden kitchen and laughed—a soft, rippling, irrepressible laugh, as irrepressible as the laughter of the mountain stream amid the evergreens. Then she thought of her mother; prim, sedate, conventional, correct—"Always be correct, my dear; there is a right way and a wrong way, and a well-bred person always chooses the right"—and her eyes sobered a trifle, then flashed in brighter merriment as they pictured her mother amid these surroundings.

"She would be so shocked, oh, dreadfully shocked," she rippled to herself. "I am quite sure she would never approve of Father breaking his leg with such consequences. It wasn't the correct thing—very commonplace, I should say—and think of Irene! Why, the child—she's but a child, Andrew, a very beautiful child, but with just a little weakness for the—ah—unconventional—she must be restrained—she needs her mother's guidance to protect her from the suggestion of maybe—shall I say?—vulgarity. That's a very dreadful word. Think of all the vulgar people there are in the world.... And here is dear little Irene right in the midst of it, and—horrors—revelling in it."

Then she looked again from the open window, this time with eyes that saw the vista of valley and woodland and foothill that stretched down into the opening prairie. Suddenly she realized that she was looking down upon a picture—one of Nature's obscure masterpieces—painted in brown and green and saffron against an opal canvas. It was beautiful, not with the majesty of the great mountains, nor the solemnity of the great plains, but with that nearer, more intimate relationship which is the peculiar property of the foothill country. Here was neither the flatness that, with a change of mood, could become in a moment desolation, nor the aloofness of eternal rocks towering into cold space, but the friendship of hills that could be climbed, and trees that lisped in the light wind, and water that babbled playfully over gravel ridges gleaming in the August sunshine. The girl drew a great breath of the pure air and was about to dream a new day-dream when the voice of her father brought her to earth.

"Can't you find anything that will do for a bandage?" he asked.

"Oh you dear Daddykins," she replied, her voice tremulous with self-reproach. "I had forgotten. There was a spell, or something; it just came down upon me in the window. That's a good idea, blaming one's negligence on a spell. I must remember that. But the bandage? Dear, no; the only cloth I see is the kitchen towel, and I can't recommend it. But what a goose I am! Our grips are in the car, or under it, or somewhere. I'll be back in a jiffy." And she was off at a sharp trot down the trail along which she had so recently come in Dave Elden's wagon.

At the little stream she paused. A single log was the only bridge, and although the water was not deep it ran swiftly, and still with the coldness of its glacier source. She ventured along the log, but near the centre she was seized with an acute sense of her temerity. Perhaps she had been foolish in attempting this passage without the aid of a stick. A stick, which could be shoved against the gravel below that blue water, would have been a very practical aid. Suddenly, the waverings of the mind were transmuted to the body. She felt an impetuous desire to fall upstream, which she resisted so successfully that she promptly fell down stream. The water was deeper than it looked, and colder than it looked, and when she scrambled up the farther bank she was a very wet young woman indeed. She was conscious of a deep annoyance toward young Elden. A fine bridge, that! She would tell him—but this thought died at its birth with the consciousness that Elden would be amused over the incident, and would be at little pains to disguise his merriment. And then she laughed, and ran along up the road.

The grips were duly found, and Irene congratulated herself that she and her father were in the habit of traveling with equipment for over night. She had even a spare skirt along, with which she was able to disguise her mishap at the stream, although she took the precaution not to make the change until she was safe back over the narrow bridge. And this time she used a stick. Arrived at the house, she deftly wrapped a bandage about her father's injury, and set to work at the preparation of supper—a task not strange to her, as her mother considered it correct that her daughter should have a working knowledge of kitchen affairs. Her equipment was meagre, and she spent more time scouring than cooking, but her heart beat high with the spirit of adventure.

Once, during the evening, she took a glance into the other room. It was even less inviting

than Dave's, with walls bare of any adornment, save dirty garments that hung from nails driven in the logs. On the rude bed lay an old man; she could see only part of his face; a grey moustache drooping over an open mouth, and a florid cheek turned to the glow of the setting sun. On a chair beside the bed sat a bottle, and the room reeked with the smell of breath charged with alcohol. She gently closed the door, and busied herself through the long evening with reforms in the kitchen, and with little ministrations designed to relieve the sufferings of her father.

The sun sank behind the Rockies, and a darkness, soft and mystical and silent, stole up the valley, hushing even the noiseless day. Presently the glow of the rising moon burst in ruddy effulgence over the foothills to the east, first with the effect of fire upon their crests, and then as a great, slowly-whitening ball soaring high into the fathomless heaven. The girl stood framed in the open window, and the moonlight painted her face to the purest ivory, and toyed with the rich brown fastness of her hair, and gleamed from a single ornament at her throat. And she thought of the young horseman galloping to town; wondered if he had yet set out on his homeward journey, and the eerie depths of the valley communicated to her a fantastic admiration for his skill and bravery. She was under the spell. She was in a new world, where were manhood, and silence, and the realities of being; and moonlight, and great gulfs of shadow between the hills, and large, friendly stars, and soft breezes pushing this way and that without definite direction, and strange, quiet noises from out of the depths, and the incense of the evergreens, and a young horseman galloping into the night. And conventions had been swept away, and it was correct to live, and to live!

CHAPTER TWO

The first flush of dawn was mellowing the eastern sky when the girl was awakened from uneasy sleep by sounds in the yard in front of the ranch house. She had spent most of the night by her father's side, and although he had at last prevailed upon her to seek some rest for herself, she had done so under protest and without undressing. Now, after the first dazed moment of returning consciousness, she was on her feet and through the door.

The stars were still shining brightly through the cold air. In the faint light she could distinguish a team and wagon, and men unhitching. She approached, and, in a voice that sounded strangely distant in the vastness of the calm night, called, "Is that you, Dave?"

And in a moment she wondered how she had dared call him Dave. But she soon had other cause for wonder, for the boy replied from near beside her, in that tone of friendly confidence which springs so spontaneously in the darkness, "Yes, Reenie, and the doctor, too. We'll have Mr. Hardy fixed up in no time. How did he stand the night?"

How dared he call her Reenie? A flush of resentment rose in her breast only to be submerged in the sudden remembrance that she had first called him Dave. That surely gave him the right to address her as he had done. But with this thought came recognition of the curious fact that Dave had not presumed upon her frankness; that it was not by her word that he would attempt to justify his. Indeed, she was convinced that he would have called her Reenie anyway,—just as she had called him Dave, without premeditation or intention. Then she remembered she was in the ranch country, in the foothills, where the conventions—the conventions she hated—had not yet become rooted, and where the souls of men and women stood bare in the clear light of frank acceptance of the fact. It would be idle—dangerous—to trifle with this boy by any attempt at concealment or deception. And what were conventions but a recognized formula of concealment and deception?

She could see his form now, as he led the horses toward the corral. How straight he was, and how bravely his footsteps fell on the hard earth! The poetry of his motion reached her through the darkness. She heard the harness jingle as the horses rubbed between the posts of the corral gate.

"He's a wonderful boy," said the doctor, of whose presence she had been unconscious. "Cat's eyes. Full gallop through the dark; side hills, mountain streams, up and down; break-neck. Well, here we are." The doctor breathed deeply, as though this last fact were one to occasion some wonderment. "Your brother tells me you have an injured man here; accident; stranger, I believe? Well, shall we go in?"

Brother! But why should she explain? Dave hadn't bothered. Why hadn't he? He had told about the stranger; why had he not told about both strangers? Why had he ignored her altogether? This time came another flush, born of that keen womanly intuition which understands.

With a commonplace she led the doctor into the house and to the bedside of her father. She was struck by the change in attitude of the visiting physician when he learned that his patient was of his own profession. It was like the meeting of brothers in a secret order. There was an

exchange of technical terms that might have served as password or sign into some fine fraternity, and the setting of the limb was accompanied by a running fire of professional comment as effective upon the nerves of the sufferer as an opiate.

When the operation was completed the girl turned her attention to the kitchen, where she found Dave, sweating in vicarious suffering. He had helped to draw the limb into place, and it had been his first close contact with human pain. It was different from branding calves, and he had slipped out of the room as soon as possible. The morning sun was now pouring through the window, and the distraught look on the boy's face touched her even more than the frankness of the words spoken in the darkness. She suddenly remembered that he had been up all night—for her. She would not deceive herself with the thought that it was for her father's sake Dave had galloped to town, found a doctor, secured a fresh team and driven back along the little-used foothill trails. She recalled the doctor's terse description of that journey. No doubt Dave would have done it all for her father, had her father been there alone, but as things were she had a deep conviction that he had done it for her. And it was with a greater effort than seemed reasonable that she laid her fingers on his arm and said, "Thank you, Dave."

"What for?" he asked, and she could not doubt the genuineness of his question.

"Why, for bringing the doctor, and all that. Driving all night on those awful roads. We fell off them in day time. I am sure I can't—Father won't be able to—"

"Oh, shucks," he interrupted, with a manner which, on the previous afternoon, she would have called rudeness. "That's nothin'. But say, I brought home some grub. The chuck here was pretty tame; guess you found that out last night." He looked about the room, and she knew that he was taking note of her house-cleaning, but he made no remark on the subject.

"Well, let's get breakfast," she said, after a moment's pause, and for lack of other conversation. "You must be hungry."

Dave's purchases had been liberal. They included fresh meat and vegetables, canned goods, coffee, rice and raisins. He laid the last three items on the table with a great dissembling of indifference, for he was immensely proud of them. They were unwonted items on the Elden bill of fare; he had bought them especially for her. From somewhere the knowledge had been borne in upon him that city people frequently drink coffee for breakfast, and the rice and raisins were an inspiration quite his own. He would see what she could do with them. But she busied herself at the breakfast without a thought of the epoch-marking nature of these purchases.

"Do you milk?" she asked, presently.

"Milk what?" he demanded, pausing with stove-lid and lifter raised in his hand, in the half-completed act of putting wood on the fire.

"Dave!" she cried. "Put that lid down. Look at the smoke." A blue cloud was curling under the rafters. "Yes," he said, with great composure. "It always does that in this country."

She shot a quick glance at him. Was he making fun of her? No; plainly not; he was just making fun *with* her; he had a vein of humor. And a little before she had found his face drawn in sympathy for her father. Perhaps for her.... He was not all on the surface.

He completed his operation at the stove and returned the lid to its place with no lack of deliberation. He was evidently waiting for her to speak again, but she worked on in silence.

"What did you say about milking?" he ventured at length.

"I asked you if you milked," she said, with an attempt at curtness. "And you answered, 'Milk what?' as though that were clever. And we need milk for breakfast."

"Well, I was serious enough," he said. "There isn't a cow within twenty miles."

"No cows? Why, I thought this was the ranching country?"

"Sure thing. We sell beef and buy milk. Let me show you."

He approached a packing-case on the wall, walking softly and extending his hands as though to touch it gently, and murmuring, "So boss; so boss," as he went. From the box he removed a tin of condensed milk, which he set on the table. In his pocket he found a nail, and with a hammer quickly made two holes in the tin.

"Milkin' is finished," he announced.

At this juncture the doctor, who had been resting in the room with his patient, entered the kitchen. During the setting of the limb he had gradually become aware of the position of Irene in the household, but had that not been so, one glance at the boy and girl as they now stood in the bright morning sunshine, he with his big, wiry frame, his brown face, his dark eyes, his black hair; she, round and knit and smooth, with the pink shining through her fair skin and the light of youth dancing in her grey eyes and the light of day glancing on her brown hair, must have told him they had sprung from widely separated stock. For one perilous moment he was about to

apologize for the mistake made in the darkness, but some wise instinct closed his lips. But he wondered why she had not corrected him.

They were seated at breakfast when the senior Elden made his appearance. He had slept off his debauch and was as sober as a man in the throes of alcoholic appetite may be. He was only partially dressed; his face had the peculiar bulginess of the hard drinker; his eyes were watery and shifty, and several days' growth of beard, with patchy grey and black spots, gave a stucco effect to his countenance. His moustache drooped over a partly open mouth; the top of his large head was bald, and the hair that hung about his ears was much darker than his moustache. Seeing the strangers, he hesitated in his lurch toward the water pail, steadied himself on wide-spread feet, very flat on the floor, and waved his right hand slowly in the air. Whether this was to be understood as a form of salutation or a gesture of defiance was a matter of interpretation.

"Vishitors," said the old man, at length. "Always welcome, m'sure. 'Sh scush me." He made his uncertain way to the water bench, took a great drink, and set about washing his face and hands, while the breakfast proceeded in silence. As his preparations neared completion Irene set a place at the table.

"Won't you sit down here, Mr. Elden?" she said. There had been no introductions. Dave ate on in silence.

"Thank you," said the old man, and there was something in his voice which may have been emotion, or may have been the huskiness of the heavy drinker's throat. The girl gave it the former explanation. Perhaps it was his unintended tribute to that touch of womanly attentiveness to which his old heart still beat response. As he took the proffered chair she saw in this old man shreds of dignity which the less refined eye of his son had not distinguished. To Dave, his father was an affliction to be borne; an unfair load on a boy who had done nothing to deserve this punishment. The miseries associated with his parentage had gone far to make him sour and moody. Irene at first had thought him rude and gloomy; flashes of humor had modified that opinion, but she had not yet learned that his disposition was naturally a buoyant one, weighed down by an environment which had made it soggy and unresponsive. In years to come she was to know what unguessed depths of character were to be revealed when that stoic nature was cross-sectioned by the blade of a keen and defiant passion. This morning she foresaw nothing of those future revelations, but in the old man her instinct detected qualities which perhaps were awaiting only some touch of sympathetic understanding to flash forth even yet like that burst of sunset radiance which sometimes marks the close of a leaden day.

Mr. Elden promptly engaged the doctor in conversation, and in a few moments had gleaned the main facts in connection with the accident and the father and daughter which it had brought so involuntarily under his roof. He was quite sober now, and his speech, although slovenly, was not indelicate. He was still able to pay to woman that respect which curbs the coarseness of a tongue for years subjected to little discipline.

After breakfast Irene attended to the wants of her father, and by this time the visiting doctor was manifesting impatience to be away. Other fees were calling him, and he assured Doctor Hardy, what the latter quite well knew, that nothing more could be done for him at present. He would come again at any time if summoned by the young man, or if his professional duties should bring him into the neighborhood of the Elden ranch. But Dave declared with prompt finality that the horses must rest until after noon, and the doctor, willy-nilly, spent the morning rambling in the foothills. Meanwhile the girl busied herself with work about the house, in which she was effecting a rapid transformation.

After the mid-day dinner Dave harnessed the team for the journey to town, but before leaving inquired of Irene if there were any special purchases, either personal or for the use of the house, which she would recommend. With some diffidence she mentioned one that was uppermost in her thoughts: soap, both laundry and toilet. Dr. Hardy had no hesitation in calling for a box of his favorite cigars and some new magazines, and took occasion to press into the boy's hand a bill out of all proportion to the value of the supplies requested. There was an argument in the yard, which the girl did not fully hear, between father and son, but she gathered that the old man insisted on going to town, and, failing that, that Dave should replenish his stock of whiskey, to neither of which would the young man consent. It was evident that Dave was the responsible person in the affairs of the Elden ranch.

The day was introductory to others that were to follow. Dave returned the next afternoon, riding his own horse, and heavily laden with cigars, magazines, soap, and with a soft little package which proved to be a sponge, which he had bought on his own initiative, and which he tendered to Irene. She took it with slowly rising color, and with a strange misgiving whether this was a bona fide contribution to the toilet equipment of the house, or a quiet satire designed to offset the effect of the appeal for soap.

The following day it was decided that the automobile, which since the accident had lain upturned by the roadway, should be brought to the ranch buildings. Dave harnessed his team, and, instead of riding one of the horses, walked behind, driving by the reins, and accompanied by the girl, who had proclaimed her ability to steer the car. When they reached the stream she hesitated, remembering her mishap, but the boy slipped his unoccupied hand firmly under her arm, and they walked the log in safety. It seemed to Irene that he continued his assistance when

it was no longer needed, but she accepted the courtesy without remark.

With the aid of the team and Dave's lariat the car was soon righted, and was found to be none the worse for its deflection from the beaten track. Irene presided at the steering wheel, watching the road with great intentness, and turning the wheel too far on each occasion, which gave to her course a somewhat wavy or undulating order, such as is found in bread knives, or perhaps a better figure would be to compare it to that rolling motion affected by fancy skaters. However, the mean of her direction corresponded with the mean of the trail, and all went merrily until the stream was approached. Here was a rather steep descent, and the car showed a sudden purpose to engage the horses in a contest of speed. The animals were suspicious enough at best of their strange wagon, and had no thought of allowing it to assume the initiative. Now, Irene knew perfectly well where the brake was, and how to use it. In fact, there were two brakes, operated by different members, and perhaps it was this duplication, intended to insure safety, that was responsible for her undoing. Her first impulse was to use the emergency, but to do so she must remove her hand from the steering wheel, where it was very fully occupied. She did start to put this impulse into effect, but an unusually violent deflection caused her to reconsider that intention. She determined to use the foot brake, a feat which was accomplished, under normal conditions, by pressing one foot firmly against a contraption somewhere beneath the steering post. She shot a quick glance downward, and to her alarm discovered not one, but three contraptions, all apparently designed to receive the pressure of a foot—if one could reach them—and as similar as the steps of a stair. This involved a further hesitation, and in automobiling he who hesitates invites a series of rapid experiences. By this time all Irene's attention was required to bring the car to some unanimity of direction. It was quite evident that it was running away. It was quite evident that the horses were running away. The situation assumed the qualities of a race, and the only matter of grave doubt related to its termination. Dave, still holding fast to the reins, ran beside the car with prodigious strides which enabled him to bring but little restraint upon the team, and Irene held to the steering wheel with a grip of desperation.

Then they struck the water. It was not more than two feet deep, but the extra resistance it caused, and the extra alarm it excited in the horses, resulted in the breaking of the lariat. Dave still clung fast to his team, and, now that the terrifying rival no longer pursued them, they were soon brought to a standstill. Having pacified them he tied them to a post and returned to the stream. The car sat in the middle; the girl had put her feet on the seat beside her, and the swift water flowed by a few inches below. She was laughing merrily when Dave, very wet in parts, appeared on the bank.

"Well, I'm not wet, except for a little splashing," she said, "and you are. Does anything occur to you?" Without reply he walked stolidly into the cold water, took her in his arms, and carried her ashore. The lariat was soon repaired and the car hauled to the ranch buildings without further mishap.

Later in the day he said to her, "Can you ride?"

"Some," she answered. "I have ridden city horses, but don't know about these ranch animals. You know, a city horse has to do as he is told, but a ranch horse seems to do pretty much as he likes. But I would like to try—if I had a saddle."

"I have an extra saddle," he said. "But it's a man's.... They all ride that way here."

She made no answer, and the subject was dropped for the time. But the next morning she saw Dave ride away, leading a horse by his side. He did not return until evening, but when he came the idle horse carried a saddle.

"It's a strad-legger," he said when he drew up beside Irene, "but it's a girl's. I couldn't find anythin' else in the whole diggin's."

"I'm sure it will do—splendidly—if I can just stick on," she replied. But another problem was already in her mind. It apparently had not occurred to Dave that women require special clothing for riding, especially if it's a "strad-legger." She opened her lips to mention this, then closed them again. He had been to enough trouble on her account. He had already spent a whole day scouring the country for a saddle.... She would manage some way.

Late that night she was busy with scissors and needle.

CHAPTER THREE

Dr. Hardy recovered from his injuries as rapidly as could be expected, and, while he chafed somewhat over spending his holidays under such circumstances, the time passed not unhappily. Had he sought the world over for a haven from the intrusion of business or professional cares he could have found it nowhere in greater perfection than in the foothill country centering about the

Elden ranch. Here was an Arcadia where one might well return to the simple life; a little bay of still water sheltered from the onrushing tide of affairs by the warm brown prairies and the white-bosomed mountains towering through their draperies of blue-purple mist. It was life as far removed from his accustomed circles as if he had been suddenly spirited to a different planet. It was life without the contact of life, without the crowd and jostle and haste and gaiety and despair that are called life; but the doctor wondered if, after all, it did not come nearer to filling the measure of experience—which is life.

A considerable acquaintanceship had sprung up between him and the senior Elden. The rancher had come from the East forty years before, but in turning over their memories the two men found many links of association; third persons known to them both; places, even streets and houses common to their feet in early manhood; events of local history which each could recall, although from different angles. And Elden's life in the West had been a treasury of experience, in which he now dipped for the first time in years, regaling his guest with tales of the open range long before barbed wire had stuck its poisoned fang into the heart of the ranchman; tales of horse-stealing and cattle-rustling, with glimpses of sudden justice unrecorded in the official documents of the territory; of whiskey-running and excess and all those large adventures that drink the red blood of the wilderness. In his grizzled head and stooping frame he carried more experiences than would fill a dozen well-rounded city lives, and he had the story-teller's art which scorns to spoil dramatic effect by a too strict adherence to fact. But over one phase of his life he kept the curtain resolutely down. No ray of conversation would he admit into the more personal affairs of his heart, or of the woman who had been his wife, and even when the talk turned on the boy he quickly withdrew it to another topic, as though the subject were dangerous or distasteful. But once, after a long silence following such a diversion, had he betrayed himself into a whispered remark, an outburst of feeling rather than a communication. "I've been alone so much," he said. "It seems I have never been anything but alone. And—sooner or later—it gets you—it gets you."

"You have the boy," ventured the doctor.

"No," he answered, almost fiercely. "That would be different, I could stand it then. But I haven't got him, and I can't get him. He despises me because—because I take too much at times." He paused as though wondering whether to proceed with this unwonted confidence, but the ache in his heart insisted on its right to human sympathy. "No, it ain't that," he continued. "He despises me because he thinks I wasn't fair to his mother. He can't understand. He doesn't know yet that there's things—pulls and tugs of life, that lead a man as helpless as a steer chokin' in his lasso. I was like that. I wanted to be good to her, to be close to her. Then I took to booze, as natural as a steer under the brandin' iron roars to drown his hurt. But the boy don't understand." The old man got up and stood at the western window, watching the gold of approaching sunset gather on the mountains.... "He despises me." Then, after a long silence, "No matter. I despise myself."

The doctor approached and placed a hand on his shoulder. But Elden was himself again. The curtains of his life, which he had drawn apart for a moment, he whipped together again rudely, almost viciously, and covered his confusion by plunging into a tale of how he had led a breed suspected of cattle rustling on a little canter of ten miles with a rope about his neck and the other end tied to the saddle. "He ran well," said the old man, chuckling still at the reminiscence. "And it was lucky he did. It was a strong rope."

The morning after Dave had brought in the borrowed saddle Irene appeared in a sort of bloomer suit, somewhat wonderfully contrived from the spare skirt to which allusion has been made, and announced a willingness to risk life and limb on any horse that Dave might select for that purpose. He provided her with a dependable mount, and their first journey, taken somewhat gingerly along the principal trail, was accomplished without incident. It was the fore-runner of many others, plunging deeper and deeper into the fastnesses of the foothills, and even into the passes of the very mountains themselves. These long rides through the almost untracked wilderness, frequently along paths on which the element of danger was by no means a mere fancy, and into regions where the girl's sense of distance and direction were totally confused, afforded her many side-lights on the remarkable nature of her escort. His patience was infinite, and, although there were no silk trappings to his courtesy, it was a very genuine and manly deference he paid her. She was quite sure that he would at any moment give his life if needed to defend her from injury—and accept the transaction as a matter of course. His physical endurance was inexhaustible, and his knowledge of prairie and foothill seemed to her almost uncanny. When she had been utterly lost for hours he would suddenly swing their horses' heads about and guide them home with the accuracy of the wild goose on its nights to the nesting grounds. He read every sign of footprint, leaf, water, and sky with unfailing insight. He had no knowledge of books, and she had at first thought him ignorant, but as the days went by she had found in him a mine of wisdom which shamed her ready-made education.



These long rides afforded her many side-lights on the remarkable nature of her escort.

[Illustration: These long rides afforded her many side-lights on the remarkable nature of her escort.]

After such a ride they one day dismounted in a grassy opening among the trees that bordered a mountain canyon. The waters of ages had chiselled a sharp passage through the rock, and the green stream now swirled in its rapid course a hundred feet below. Fragments of rock, loosened by the sun and wind and frost of centuries, had fallen from time to time, leaving sheltered nooks and shelves in the walls of the canyon. In one of these crevices they found a flat stone that gave comfortable seating, and here they rested while the horses browsed their afternoon meal on the grass above. Little irregular bits of stone had broken off the parent rock, and for awhile they amused themselves with tossing these into the water. But both were conscious of a gradually increasing tension in the atmosphere. For days the boy had been moody. It was evident he was harbouring something that was calling through his nature for expression, and Irene knew that this afternoon he would talk of more than trees and rocks and footprints of the wild things of the forest.

"Your father is gettin' along well," he said at length.

"Yes," she answered. "He has had a good holiday, even with his broken leg. He is looking ever so much better."

"You will be goin' away before long," he continued.

"Yes," she answered, soberly, and waited.

"Things about here ain't goin' to be the same after you're gone," he went on. He was avoiding her eyes and industriously throwing bits of crumbled rock into the canyon. He wore no coat, and the neck of his shirt was open, for the day was warm. Had he caught her side-long glances even his slow, self-deprecating mind must have read their admiration. But he kept his eyes fixed on the green water.

"You see," he said, "before you came it was different. I didn't know what I was missin', an' so it didn't matter. Not but what I was dog-sick of it at times, but still I thought I was livin',—thought this was life, and, of course, now I know it ain't. At least, it won't be after you're gone."

"That's strange," she said, not in direct answer to his remark, but as a soliloquy on it as she turned it over in her mind. "This life, now, seems empty to you. All my old life seems empty to me. This seems to me the real life, out here in the foothills, with the trees, and the mountains, and— and our horses, you know."

She might have ended the sentence in a way that would have come much closer to him, and been much truer, but conventionality had been bred into her for generations and she did not find it possible yet freely to speak the truth. Indeed, as she thought of her position here it seemed to her she had become shamelessly unconventional. She thought of her mother, careful, correct,— "Always be correct, my dear,"—and wondered what she would say could she see her only child on these wild, unchaperoned rides and in these strange confidences where she was a girl and

Dave was a boy and all the artificialities with which society aims to protect itself had been stripped away. There was a dash of adventure which added to the relish of the situation.

"It's such a wonderful life," she continued. "One gets so strong and happy in it."

"You'd soon get sick of it," he said. "We don't see nothin'. We don't learn nothin'. Reenie, I'm eighteen, an' I bet you could read an' write better'n me when you was six."

"Did you never go to school?" she asked, in genuine surprise. She knew his speech was ungrammatical, but thought that due to careless training rather than to no training at all.

"Where'd I go to school?" he demanded bitterly. "There ain't a school within forty miles. Guess I wouldn't have went if I could," he added as an afterthought, wishing to be quite honest in the matter. "School didn't seem to cut no figure—until jus' lately."

"But you have learned—some?" she continued.

"Some. When I was a little kid my father used to work with me at times. He learned me to read a little, an' to write my name, an' a little more. But things didn't go right between him an' mother, an' he got to drinkin' more an' more, an' just makin' hell of it. We used to have a mighty fine herd of steers here, but it's all shot to pieces. We don't put up hardly no hay, an' in a bad winter they die like rabbits. When we sell a bunch the old man'll stay in town for a month or more, blowin' the coin and leavin' the debts go. But I've been fixin' him this year or two. I sneak a couple of steers away now an' then, an' with the money I keep our grocery bills paid up, an' have a little to rattle in my jeans. My credit's good at any store in town," and Irene thrilled to the note of pride in his voice as he said this. The boy had real quality in him. "But I'm sick of it all," he continued. "Sick of it, an' I wanna get out."

"You think you are not educated," she answered, trying to meet his outburst as tactfully as possible. "Perhaps you are not, the way we think of it in the city. But I guess there's a good many things you can't learn out of books, and I guess you could show the city boys a good many things they don't know, and never will know."

For the first time he looked her straight in the face. His dark eyes met her grey ones, and demanded truth. "Irene," he said, "do you mean that?"

"Sure I do," she answered. "College courses, and all that kind of thing; they're good stuff, all right, but they make some awful nice boys—real live boys, you know—into some awful dead ones. Either they get the highbrow, and become bores, or the swelled head, and become cads. Not all, you know, but lots of them. And then when they get out they have to start learning the real things of life—things that you have been learning here for ever so long. My father says about the best education is to learn to live within your income, pay your debts, and give the other fellow a chance to do the same. They don't all learn that in college. So when they get out they have to go and work for somebody who has learned it, like you have. Then there's the things you do, just like you were born to it, that they couldn't do to save their lives. Why, I've seen you smash six bottles at a stretch, you going full gallop, and whooping and shooting so we could hardly tell which was which. And ride—you could make more money riding for city people to look at than most of those learned fellows, with letters after their names like the tail of a kite, will ever see. But I wouldn't like you to make it that way. There's more useful things to do."

He was comforted by this speech, but he referred to his accomplishments modestly. "Ridin' an' shootin' ain't nothin'," he said.

"I'm not so sure," she answered. "Father says the day is coming when our country will want men who can shoot and ride more than it will want lawyers or professors."

"Well, when it does, it can call on me," he said, and there was the pride in his voice which comes to a boy who feels that in some way he can take a man's place in the world. "Them is two things I sure can do."

Years later she was to think of her remark and his answer, consecrated then in clean red blood.

They talked of many things that afternoon, and when at last the lengthening shadows warned them it was time to be on the way they rode long distances in silence. Both felt a sense which neither ventured to express, that they had travelled very close in the world of their hopes and sorrows and desires. Perhaps, as they rode along the foothill trail, they were still journeying together down the long, strange trails of the future; dim, visionary, exquisite trails; rough, hard, cruel trails hidden in the merciful mirage of their young hopefulness.

The shadows had deepened into darkness, and the infinite silence of the hills hung about them as they dropped from their saddles at the Elden door. A light shone from within, and Dr. Hardy, who was now able to move about with the aid of a home-made crutch, could be seen setting the table, while Mr. Elden stirred a composition on the stove. They chatted as they worked, and there was something of the joy of little children in their companionship. The young folks watched for a moment through the window, and in Dave's heart some long-forgotten emotion moved momentarily at the sight of the good fellowship prevailing in the old house. Irene,

too, was thinking; glimpses of her own butlered home, and then this background of primal simplicity, where the old cow-man cooked the meals and the famous specialist set the plates on the bare board table, and then back of it all her mother, sedate and correct, and very much shocked over this mingling of the classes. But the girl's reverie was cut short by a sudden affectionate licking of her fingers, and glancing downward she found Brownie, adopted early in her visit at the Eldens', expressing its fondness in the only fashion at its command.

The calf had been an incident in her ranch experience. It was a late comer, quite unable to keep pace with the earlier fruits of the herd, and had the additional misfortune to be born of an ambitious mother, who had no thought of allowing her domestic duties to impair her social relationships with the matrons and males of her immediate set. She had no place for old-fashioned notions; she was determined to keep up with the herd and the calf might fare as best it could. So they rambled from day to day; she swaggering along with the set, but turning now and then to send an impatient moo toward the small brown body stuck on four long, ungainly legs,—legs which had an unfortunate habit of folding up, after the fashion of a jack knife, upon unforeseen occasions, and precipitating the owner in a huddled mass on the ground. At rare times, when heaven must have stooped close about the herd, the mother instinct would assert itself, and the cow would return to her offspring, licking it lavishly and encouraging it with mooings of deep affection, but such periods of bliss were of short duration. The lure of "the life" was too great for her; she felt herself born for more important roles than mere motherhood, and she would presently rush away to her favourite circle, leaving her begotten to such fates as might befall.

It was on such an occasion, when left far behind, that one of the ungainly legs found its way into a badger hole. The collapse was harder and more complete than usual, and the little sufferer would have died there had he not been found by Dave and Irene in the course of their rides. Dave, after a moment's examination, drew his revolver, but Irene pled for the life of the unfortunate.

"Oh, don't kill it, Dave," she cried. "You couldn't kill it! Let's get the wagon and take it home. It'll get all right, won't it?"

"Never be worth a—," said Dave, checking his vocabulary in the nick of time. "Once they begin to give trouble you might's well knock 'em on the head."

"But it's cruel," she protested. "Just to kill it because it's hurt."

"I don't know about the cruel," he answered. "You see, they're all raised, every one of 'em, to be killed, anyway. Jus' like people, I guess. Sooner or later. But if your heart's set on this little crittur, we'll save it's long as we can."

So the calf was taken home and became Irene's special care. The mother was captured and tied up in the corral, and the calf, although lame, began to thrive and wax strong. It would gallop in its ungainly way about the yard, in its exuberation of youthful innocence, while the mother pined for the latest scandal from the great fields over the hills.

"Brownie, we'll call it," said Irene, "on account of its colour."

"All right," said Dave, "on account of your sweater. That'll sort o' show the connection."

So this night she rubbed its nose, and scratched its forehead, and then reproved its affection, which had a habit of running to extremes. And the mother cow moored from the corral, and Brownie forgot his benefactress and ambled away at the call of the blood.

"Well, you youngsters must have this country pretty well explored," said Dr. Hardy, as they entered the house. "Where was it today: the prairies, the foothills, or the real fellows behind?"

"The canyon, up the river," said Irene, drawing off her sweater. "What's the eats? Gee, I'm hungry. Getting pretty supple, Daddykins, aren't you?"

"Yes, an' I'm sorry for it, Miss," said the old rancher. "Not wishin' him any harm, or you neither. We was jus' talkin' it over, an' your father thinks he's spry enough for the road again. Ain't ever goin' to be like it use to be after he's gone, an' you."

So the afternoon's conversations in the canyon and the cabin had been on the same theme, although prompted by very different emotions. Yet the girl wondered whether the loneliness in the old man's heart, which cried out to his own sex, might not bear some relationship to a strange, new sense she herself was experiencing; a sense which reminded her that she was incomplete—and alone. And it called across the barrier of sex for completion.

"We'll be sorry to go," said the doctor. "That's what I've been saying all day, and thinking, too. If misfortunes can be lucky, ours was one of that kind. I don't know when I've enjoyed a holiday so much. What do you say, girl?" he asked, as he rested an arm on her round, firm shoulder and looked with fatherly fondness into the fine brown of her face.

"I've never known anything like it," she answered. "It's wonderful. It's life." Then with a sudden little scream she exclaimed, "Oh, Daddy, why can't you sell your practice and buy a

ranch? Wouldn't that be wonderful?"

"Your mother might not see it that way," he replied, and her eyes fell. Yes, that was the obstacle. She would have to go back to the city, and talk by rule, and dress by rule, and behave by rule, and be correct. She wondered how often her father had turned from the path of the true adventure because her mother "might not see it that way."

"It's been a good time," the doctor continued, when they had commenced supper, "but I've already overstayed my holiday. Well, I had good excuse. I feel that I can travel now, and my leg will be pretty strong by the time I am back East. If Dave will oblige us by going to town tomorrow and bringing back someone who can drive a car we will be able to start the following morning. I will just take the car to town and either sell it there or ship it."

The following morning found Dave early on the trail, leading a saddled horse by his side. The hours were leaden for the girl all that day, and looking into the future she saw the spectre of her life shadowed down the years by an unutterable loneliness. How could she ever drop it all—all this wild freedom, this boundless health, this great outdoors, this life, life, how could she drop it all and go back into the little circle where convention fenced out the tiniest alien streamlet, although the circle itself might lie deep in mire? And how would she give up this boy who had grown so imperceptibly but so intimately into the very soul of her being; give him up with all his strength, and virility, and—yes, and coarseness, if you will—but sincerity too; an essential man, as God made him, in exchange for a machine-made counterfeit with the stamp of Society? Deeply did she ponder these questions, and as the day wore on she found herself possessed of a steadily growing determination that she would not follow the beaten trail, let the by-paths lead where they might.

Darkness, save for a white moon, had settled over the foothills when the boy returned with another young man. The stranger ate a ravenous supper, but was not too occupied to assay conversation with Irene. Indeed, from their meeting at the doorway his eyes scarcely left her. He chose to call her cook.

"Swell pancakes, cook," was his opening remark. "Can you find another for yours truly?"

She refilled his plate without answer.

"Used to know a girl mighty like you," he went on. "Waitress in the Royal Edward. Gee, but she was swell! A pippin! Class! Say, she had 'em all guessing. Had me guessing myself for awhile. But just for awhile." He voiced these remarks with an air of intense self-approval more offensive than the words.

Irene felt the colour rise about her neck and cheeks and run like an over-flowing stream into her ears and about her hair. It was evident that, for a second time, Dave had chosen to say nothing to strangers about her presence at the ranch. But that was not what brought the colour. She was addressed as a menial, as a hired helper in the Elden household! Her own honesty told her that even that was not what brought the colour. It was not even the man's insolent familiarity; it was his assumption that his familiarity would not be resented. Her father and Mr. Elden were in Dave's room; Dave had stopped eating and she saw the veins rising in his clenched fists. But the challenge was to her, and she would accept it; she felt no need of his protection.

"Fill your stomach," she said, passing more pancakes; "your head is hopeless."

He attempted a laugh, but the meal was finished in silence. The stranger lit a cigarette, and Irene went to the door with Dave. An over-lace of silver moonlight draped the familiar objects near at hand and faded into the dark, vague lingerie of night where the spruce trees cut their black wedge along the valley.

"Come for a walk," he whispered. "The horses are tired, so let's walk.... It's our last chance."

She ran for her sweater and rejoined him in a moment. They walked in silence down a path through the fragrant trees, but Dave turned from time to time to catch a glimpse of her face, white and fine as ivory in the soft light. He had much to say; he felt that the ages could not utter all he had to say to-night, but he was tongue-tied under the spell of her beauty.

"You squelched him, all right," he broke out at length.

"Just in time, too, I think," she replied. "I was watching your hands."

He smiled a quiet but very confident smile. "Reenie," he said, "that fellow makes me sick. All the way out he talked about girls. If it hadn't been that I was makin' the trip for your father I'd 'a' licked him on the road, sure. He's a city chap, an' wears a white collar, but he ain't fit to speak your name. Another minute an' I'd 'a' had 'im by the neck." He seized a spruce limb that stuck across their path. It was the size of a stout stick but he snapped it with a turn of his wrist. It was very tough; it oozed sticky stuff where he broke it. "His neck," he said, between his teeth. "Jus' like that."

They reached an open space. Something black—or was it red?—lay on the ground. Dave bent over it a moment, then looked up to her white, clear face, whiter and clearer than ever since

witnessing the strength of his hate.

"It's Brownie," he said, as calmly as he could. "Half et up. Wolves, I guess."

He saw her eyes grow slowly larger in the moonlight. Without a word she sank to her knees. He saw her fingers about her head, burrowing in her hair. Then she looked up, over the black trees, to the sky with its white moon and its few great stars.

"The poor, poor thing," she breathed. "The poor, innocent thing. Why did it have to die?"

"It's always the innocent things 'at suffers," he answered.

"Always the innocent things," she repeated mechanically. "Always—"

She sprang to her feet and faced him. "Then what about the justice of God?" she demanded.

"I don' know nothin' about the justice of God," he answered, bitterly. "All I know is the crittur 't can't run gets caught."

There was a long pause. "It doesn't seem right," she said at length.

"It ain't right," he agreed. "But I guess it's life. I see it here on the prairies with every living thing. Everything is a victim, some way or other. Even the wolves 'at tore this little beast 'll go down to some rancher's rifle, maybe, although they were only doing what nature said ... I guess it's the same way in the cities; the innocent bein' hunted, an' the innocenter they are the easier they're caught. An' then the wolves beggin' off, an' sayin' it was only nature."

The girl had no answer. No one had ever talked to her like this. What did this country boy know? And yet it was plain he did know. He had lived among the fundamentals.

"I guess I was like that, some," he went on. "I've been caught. I guess a baby ain't responsible for anything, is it? I didn't pick my father or my mother, did I? But I got to bear it."

There was something near a break in his voice on the last words. She felt she must speak.

"I think your father is a wonderful old man," she said, "and your mother must have been wonderful, too. You should be proud of them both."

"Reenie, do you mean that?" he demanded. His eyes were looking straight into hers. Once before he had faced her with that question, and she had not forgotten.

"Absolutely," she answered. "Absolutely, I mean it."

"Then I'm goin' to say some more things to you," he went on, rapidly. "Things 'at I didn't know whether to say or not, but now they've got to be said, whatever happens. Reenie, I haven't ever been to school, or learned lots of things I should 'a' learned, but I ain't a fool, neither. I know 'at when you're home you live thousands of miles from me, but I know 'at in your mind you live further away than that. I know it's like all the prairies an' all the oceans were between us. But I know, too, that people cross prairies an' oceans, an' I'm wantin' to cross. I know it takes time, an' I'll be a slow traveller, but I'm a mighty persistent crittur when I start out. I didn't learn to break all those bottles in a day. Well, I can learn other things, too, an' I will, if only it will take me across. I'm goin' to leave this old ranch, someway, jus' as soon as it can be arranged. I'm goin' to town, an' work. I'm strong; I can get pretty good wages. I've been thinkin' it all over, and was askin' some questions in town to-day. I can work days and go to school nights. An' I'll do it if—if it'll get me across. You know what I mean. I ain't askin' no pledges, Reenie, but what's the chance? I know I don't talk right, an' I don't eat right—you tried not to notice, but you couldn't help—but Reenie, I think right, an' I guess with a girl like you that counts more than eatin' and talkin'."

She had thought she could say yes or no to any question he could ask, but as he poured forth these plain passionate words she found herself enveloped in a flame that found no expression in speech. She had no words. She was glad when he went on.

"I know I'm only a boy, an' you're only a girl. That's why I don' ask no pledge. I leave you free, only I want you to stay free until I have my chance. Will you promise that?"

She tried to pull herself together. "You know I've had a good time with you, Dave," she said, "and I've gone with you everywhere, like I would not have gone with any other boy I ever knew, and I've talked and let you talk about things I never talked about before, and I believe you're true and clean, and—and—"

"Yes," he said. "What's your answer?"

"I know you're true and clean," she repeated. "Come to me—like that—when I'm a woman and you're a man, and then—then we'll know."

He was tall and straight, and his shadow fell across her face, as though even the moon must not see. "Reenie," he said, "kiss me."

For one moment she thought of her mother. She knew she stood at the parting of the ways; that all life for her was being moulded in that moment. Then she put both her arms about his neck and drew his lips to hers.

CHAPTER FOUR

Dave's opportunity came sooner than he expected. After the departure of the Hardys things at the old ranch were as both father and son had predicted, very different. They found themselves on a sort of good behaviour; a behaviour which, unhappily excited in each other grave suspicions as to purpose. Between these two men rude courtesies or considerations of any kind had been so long forgotten that attempts to reintroduce them resulted in a sort of estrangement more dangerous than the old open hostility. The tension steadily increased, and both looked forward to the moment when something must give way.

For several weeks the old man remained entirely sober, but the call of the appetite in him grew more and more insistent as the days went by, and at last came the morning when Dave awoke to find him gone. He needed no second guess; the craving had become irresistible and his father had ridden to town for the means to satisfy it. The passing days did not bring his return, but this occasioned no anxiety to Dave. In the course of a carouse his father frequently remained away for weeks at a stretch, and at such times it was Dave's custom to visit the boys on a ranch a dozen miles over the foothills to the southward. These boys had a sister, and what was more natural than that Dave should drown his loneliness in such company?

But this time he did not ride southward over the hills. He moped around the ranch buildings, sat moodily by the little stream, casting pebbles in the water, or rode over the old trails on which she had so often been his companion. The season was bright with all the glory of the foothill September; the silver dome of heaven, cloudless morning and noon, ripened with the dying day into seas of gold on which floated cloud-islands of purple and amethyst, and through the immeasurable silence of the night moon and stars bathed the deep valleys in celestial effulgence. But in the heart of the boy was neither sun, nor moon, nor stars, but only the black gulfs of loneliness from which his light had gone out.

Then the old man's horse came home. Dave saw it coming up the trail, not running wildly, but with nervous gallop and many sidelong turnings of the head. As the boy watched he found a strange emptiness possess him; his body seemed a phantom on which his head hung over-heavy. He spoke to the horse, which pulled up, snorting, before him; noted the wet neck and flanks, and at last the broken stirrup. Then, slowly and methodically, and still with that strange sensation of emptiness, he saddled his own horse and set out on the search....

After the last rites had been paid to the old rancher Dave set about at once to wind up his affairs, and it was not until then that he discovered how deeply his father had been involved. The selling of the cattle and the various effects realized only enough to discharge the liabilities, and when this had been done Dave found himself with a considerable area of unmarketable land, a considerable bundle of paid bills, and his horse, saddle and revolver. He rode his horse to town, carrying a few articles of wear with him. It was only after a stiff fight he could bring himself to part with his one companion. The last miles into town were ridden very slowly, with the boy frequently leaning forward and stroking the horse's neck and ears.

"Tough doin's, ol' Slop-eye," he would say. "Tough doin's. But it's got to be done. I can't keep you in town; 't ain't like out on the old ranch. An' I got a bigger job now than ever you an' me stood in on, an' we've stood in on some big ones, too, ain't we? But that's gone an' done; that old life's all busted, all of a sudden, like a bottle. Busted an' run out. I got a big job on now, an' you can't take no part. You jus' got to get out. You're done, see?" He sold horse and saddle for sixty dollars and took a room at a cheap hotel until he should find work and still cheaper lodgings.

In the evening he walked through the streets of the little cow-town. It was not altogether new to him; he had frequently visited it for business or pleasure, but he had never felt the sense of strangeness which oppressed him this night. In the past he had always been in the town as a visitor; his roots were still in the ranch; he could afford to notice the ways of the town, and smile to himself a whimsical smile and go on. But now he was throwing in his lot with the town; he was going to be one of it, and it stretched no arms of welcome to him. It snubbed him with its indifference.... He became aware that he was very lonely. He became aware that the gathering twilight in the great hills had never seemed so vague and empty as the dusk of this strange town. He realized that he had but one friend in the world; but one, and of her he knew not so much as her address.... He began to wonder whether he really had a friend at all; whether the girl would not discard him when he was of no further use just as he had discarded his faithful old horse. Tears of loneliness and remorse gathered in his eyes, and a mist not of the twilight blurred the street lamps now glimmering from their poles. He felt that he had treated the horse very shabbily indeed. He wanted old Slop-eye back again. He suddenly wanted him with a terrific longing; wanted him more than anything else in the world. For a moment he forgot the girl, and all his

homesickness centred about the beast which had been so long his companion and servant and friend.

"I'll buy him back in the mornin', I will, sure as hell," he said in a sudden gust of emotion. "We got to stick together. I didn't play fair with him, but I'll buy him back. Perhaps I can get a job for him, too, pullin' a light wagon, or somethin'."

The resolution to "play fair" with Slop-eye gradually restored his cheerfulness, and he walked slowly back to the hotel, looking in at many window displays as he went. Half shyly he paused before a window of women's wear; fine, filmy things, soft and elusive, and, he supposed, very expensive. He wondered if Reenie bought clothes like that to wear in her city home. And then he began to look for a brown sweater, and to move from window to window. And presently he found himself at his hotel.

The men's sitting room now presented a much more animated picture than when he had registered earlier in the evening. It was filled with ranchers, cowboys, and cattlemen of all degree; breeders, buyers, traders, owners and wage-earners, with a sprinkling of townspeople and others not directly engaged in some phase of the cattle business. The room was strong with smoke and language and exhortation and goodfellowship, to which the maudlin carousal of the line-up at the bar furnished appropriate accompaniment. Through the smoke he could see another room farther back, in which were a number of pool tables; loud voices and loud laughter and occasional awe-inspiring rips of profanity betokened deep interest in the game, and he allowed himself to drift in that direction. Soon he was in a group watching a gaudily dressed individual doing a sort of sleight-of-hand trick with three cards on a table.

"Smooth guy that," said some one at his side. The remark was evidently intended for Dave, and he turned toward the speaker. He was a man somewhat smaller than Dave; two or three years older; well dressed in town clothes; with a rather puffy face and a gold filled tooth from which a corner had been broken as though to accommodate the cigarette which hung there. He blew a slow double stream of smoke from his nostrils and repeated, "Smooth guy that."

"Yes," said Dave. Then, as it was apparent the stranger was inclined to be friendly, he continued, "What's the idea?"

The stranger nudged him gently. "Come out of the bunch," he said, in a low voice. When they had moved a little apart he went on, in a confidential tone: "He has a little trick with three cards that brings him in the easy coin. He's smooth as grease, but the thing's simple. Oh, it's awful simple. It's out of date with the circuses in the States—that was where I got wise to it—but it seems to get 'em here. Now you watch him for a minute," and they watched through an opening in the crowd about his table. The player held three cards; two red ones and a black. He passed them about rapidly over the table, occasionally turning his hand sideways so that the on-lookers could see the position of the cards. Then he suddenly threw them, face down, on the table, each card by itself.

"The trick is to locate the black card," Dave's companion explained. "It's easy enough if you just keep your eye on the card, but the trouble with these rubes is they name the card and then start to get out their money, and while they're fumbling for it he makes a change so quick they never see it. There's just one way to beat him. Get up close, but don't say you're going to play; just pretend you're getting interested. Then when you're dead sure of a card, crack your fist down on it. Glue yourself right to it, and get out your money with the other hand. When he sees you do that he'll try to bluff you; say you ain't in on it, but you just tell him that don't go, this is an open game and he's got to come through, and the crowd'll back you up. I stuck him one—a whole hundred first crack—and then he barred me. Watch him."

Dave watched. Saw the black card go down at one corner of the board; saw a bystander fumbling for a five dollar bill; saw the bill laid on the card; saw it turned up—and it was red.

"That *is* smooth," he said. "I'd 'a' sworn that was the black card."

"So it was—when you saw it," his companion explained. "But you were just like the sucker that played him. You couldn't help glancing at the jay getting out his money, and it was in that instant the trick was done. He's too quick for the eye, but that's how he does it."

Dave became interested. He saw two or three others lose fives and tens. Then his companion pinched his arm. "Watch that new guy," he whispered. "Watch him. He's wise."

A new player had approached. He stood near the table for some minutes, apparently looking on casually; then his left fist came down on one of the cards. "A hundred on this one," he said, and began thumbing out a roll with his other hand.

"You ain't playin'," said the dealer. "You ain't in on this."

"Ain't I? What do you say, fellows?" turning to the crowd. "Am I in or not?"

"Sure you're in," they exclaimed. "Sure you're in," repeated a big fellow, lounging forward. "If this guy ain't in we clean you out, see?"

"It's on me," said the dealer, with an ugly smile. "Well, if I must pay, I pay. Turn 'er up."

It was black. The dealer paid out a hundred dollars to the new player, who quickly disappeared in the crowd.

Dave had made his decision. It was plain his companion's tip was straight. There was just one way to beat this game, but it was simple enough when you knew how. He sidled close to the table, making great pretense of indifference, but watching the cards closely with his keen black eyes. The dealer showed his hand, made a few quick passes, and the black card flew out to the right. This was Dave's chance. He pounced on it with his left hand, while his other plunged into his pocket.

"Sixty dollars on this one," he cried, and there was the triumphant note in his voice of the man who knows he has beaten the other at his own game.

"You ain't playin'," said the dealer. "You ain't in on this."

"That don't go," said Dave, very quietly. "You're playin' a public game here, an' I choose to play with you, this once. Sixty dollars on this card." He was fumbling his money on the table.

"You ain't playin'," repeated the dealer. "You're a butt-in. You ain't in this game at all."

"Sure he's in," said the crowd.

"Sure he's in," repeated the big fellow who had interfered before. "He's a stranger here, but you play with him or you don't play no more in this joint, see?"

"That's hittin' me twice in the same spot, an' hittin' me hard," whined the dealer, "but you got it on me. Turn 'er up."

The card was red.

Dave looked at it stupidly. It was a moment or two before he realized that his money was gone. Then, regardless of those about, he rushed through the crowd, flinging by-standers right and left, and plunged into the night.

He walked down a street until it lost itself on the prairie; then he followed a prairie trail far into the country. The air was cold and a few drops of rain were flying in it, but he was unconscious of the weather. He was in a rage, through and through. More than once his hand went to his revolver, and he half turned on his heel to retrace his steps, but his better judgment led him on to fight it out with himself. Slop-eye was now a dream, a memory, gone—gone. Everything was gone; only his revolver and a few cents remained. He gripped the revolver again. With that he was supreme. No man in all that town of men, schooled in the ways of the West, was more than his equal while that grip lay in his palm. At the point of that muzzle he could demand his money back—and get it.

Then he laughed. Hollow and empty it sounded in the night air, but it was a laugh, and it saved his spirit. "Why, you fool," he chuckled. "You came to town for to learn somethin', didn't you? Well, you're learnin'. Sixty dollars a throw. Education comes high, don't it? But you shouldn't kick. He didn't coax you in, an' gave you every chance to back away. You butted in and got stung. Perhaps you've learned somethin' worth sixty dollars."

With these more philosophical thoughts he turned townward again, and as he tramped along his light heartedness re-asserted itself. His sense of fairness made him feel that he had no grievance against the card sharper, and in his innocence of the ways of the game it never occurred to him that the friendly stranger who had showed him how to play it, and the big fellow who insisted on his being "in", and the other player who had won a hundred dollars a few minutes before, were all partners with the sharper and probably at this moment were dividing his sixty dollars—the price of old Slop-eye—between them.

Early next morning he was awake and astir. The recollection of his loss sent a sudden pang through his morning spirits, but he tried to close his mind to it. "No use worryin' over that," he said, jingling the few coins that now represented his wealth. "That's over and gone. I traded sixty dollars for my first lesson. Maybe it was a bad trade, but anyway, I ain't goin' to squeal." He turned that thought over in his mind. It suddenly occurred to him that it expressed a principle which he might very well weave into his new life. "If I can jus' get that idea, an' live up to it," he said, "never to squeal, no matter what hits me, nor how, I guess it's worth sixty dollars." He whistled as he finished dressing, ate his breakfast cheerfully, and set out in search of employment.

CHAPTER FIVE

Almost the first person he met was the stranger who had schooled him in the gambling game the night before. He greeted Dave cordially; his voice had a soft, sedulous, almost feminine quality which Dave had not noticed in their whispered conversation in the pool room. There was something attractive about his personality; something which invited friendship and even confidence, and yet beneath these emotions Dave felt a sense of distrust, as though part of his nature rebelled against the acquaintanceship.

"That was the rottenest luck you had last night," the stranger was saying. "I never saw the beat of it. I knew you were wrong the moment you had your hand down, but I couldn't butt in then. I was hoping you'd stay and raise him next time; you might have got your money back that way."

"Oh, I don't mind the money," said Dave, cheerfully. "I don't want it back. In fact, I figure it was pretty well spent."

"Lots more where it came from, eh?" laughed the other. "You're from the ranches, I see, and I suppose the price of a steer or two doesn't worry you a hair's worth."

"*From* is right," Dave replied. "I'm from them, an' I'm not goin' back. As for money—well, I spent my last nickle for breakfast, so I've got to line up a job before noon."

The stranger extended his hand. "Shake," he said. "I like you. You're no squealer, anyway. My name is Conward. Yours?"

Dave told his name, and shook hands. Conward offered his cigarette box, and the two smoked for a few moments in silence.

"What kind of a job do you want?" Conward asked at length.

"Any kind that pays a wage," said Dave. "If I don't like it I'll chuck it as soon as I can afford t' be partic'lar, but just now I've got to get a grub-stake."

"I know the fellow that runs an employment agency down here," Conward answered. "Let's go down. Perhaps I can put you in right."

Conward spoke to the manager of the employment agency and introduced Dave.

"Nothing very choice on tap to-day," said the employment man. "You can handle horses, I suppose?"

"I guess I can," said Dave. "Some."

"I can place you delivering coal. Thirty dollars a month, and you board with the boss."

"I'll take it," said Dave.

The boss proved to be one Thomas Metford. He owned half a dozen teams and was engaged in the cartage business, specializing on coal. He was a man of big frame, big head, and a vocabulary appropriate to the purposes to which he applied it. Among his other possessions were a wife, numerous children, and a house and barn, in which he boarded his beasts of burden, including in the term his horses, his men, and his wife, in the order of their valuation. The children were a by-product, valueless until such time as they also would be able to work.

Dave's duties were simple enough. He had to drive a wagon to a coal yard, where a very superior young man, with a collar, would express surprise that he had been so long gone, and tell him to back in under chute number so-and-so. It appeared to be always a matter of great distress to this young man that Dave did not know which chute to back under until he was told. Having backed into position, a door was opened. There was a fiction that the coal in the bin should then run into the wagon box, but, as Dave at once discovered, this was merely a fiction. Aside from a few accommodating lumps near the door the coal had to be shovelled. When the box was judged to be full the wagon was driven on to the scales. If the load were too heavy some of it had to be thrown off, while the young man with the collar passed remarks appropriate to the occasion. If the load were too light less distress was experienced. Then Dave had to drive to an address that was given him, shovel the coal down a chute located in the most inaccessible position the premises afforded, and return to the coal yard, where the young man with the collar would facetiously inquire whether Mrs. Blank had invited him in to afternoon tea, or if he had been waiting for a change in the weather.

Conditions in the boarding-house had the value of distracting Dave's attention from the unpleasantness of his work. Mrs. Metford, handicapped by her numerous offspring, embittered by the regular recurrence of her contributions to the State, and disheartened by drudgery and overwork, had long ago ceased to place any store on personal appearance or even cleanliness. As Dave watched her slovenly shuffle to and from the kitchen, preceded and pursued by young Metfords in all degrees of childish innocence, his mind flew back to dim recollections of his own mother, and the quiet, noiseless order of their home. Even in the latter days, when he and his father had been anything but model housekeepers, they had never known such squalor as this.

Metford's attitude toward his wife fluctuated from course humour to brutality, but there was left in the woman no spark of spirit to resist. With neither tongue nor eye did she make any response, and her shufflings back and forth were neither hastened nor delayed by the pleasure of her lord. Her bearing was that of one who has suffered until the senses are numb, who has drunk the last dregs of bitterness, for whom no possible change of condition can be worse. Her indifference was tragic.

The sleeping accommodations had the virtue of simplicity. The Metford tribe was housed in a lean-to which supported one wall of the kitchen, and the eight boarders slept upstairs over the main part of the house. The room was not large, but it had four corners, and in each corner stood a cheap iron bed with baggy springs and musty mattress. The ceiling, none too high at any part, sloped at the walls almost to the edges of the beds. One table and wash basin had to serve for the eight lodgers; those who were impatient for their turn might omit their ablutions altogether or perform them in the horse-trough at the barn.

All Metford's employees, with the exception of Dave, were foreigners, more or less in conversant with the English language. Somewhat to his surprise, they maintained an attitude of superiority toward him, carrying on their conversations in a strange tongue, and allowing him little part in their common life. Dave's spirit, which had always been accustomed to receive and be received on a basis of absolute equality, rebelled violently against the intangible wall of exclusion which his fellow workers built about themselves, and as they had shown no desire for his company, he retaliated by showing still less for theirs, with the result that he found himself very much alone and apart from the life of his new surroundings.

His work and supper were over by seven o'clock each evening, and now was the opportunity for him to begin the schooling for which he had left the ranch. But he developed a sudden disinclination to make the start; he was tired in the evening, and he found it much more to his liking to stroll down town, smoke cigarettes on the street corners, or engage in an occasional game of pool. In this way the weeks went by, and when his month with Metford was up he had neglected to find another position, so he continued where he was. He was being gradually and unconsciously submerged in an inertia which, however much it might hate its present surroundings, had not the spirit to seek a more favourable environment.

So the fall and winter drifted along; Dave had made few acquaintances and no friends, if we except Conward, whom he frequently met in the pool rooms, and for whom he had developed a sort of attachment. His first underlying sense of distrust had been lulled by closer acquaintanceship; Conward's mild manner and quiet, seductive voice invited friendship, and it became a customary thing for the two to play for small stakes, which Dave won as often as he lost.

One Saturday evening as Dave was on the way to their accustomed resort he fell in with Conward on the street. "Hello, old man," said Conward, cheerily, "I was just looking for you. Got two tickets for the show to-night. Some swell dames in the chorus. Come along. There'll be doings."

There were two theatres in the town, one of which played to the better class residents. In it anything of a risqué nature had to be presented with certain trimmings which allowed it to be classified as "art," but in the other house no such restrictions existed. It was to the latter that Conward led. Dave had been there before, in the cheap upper gallery, but Conward's tickets admitted to the best seats in the house. Dave had adopted town ways to the point where he changed his clothes and put on a white collar Saturday evenings, and he found himself amid the gay rustle and perfumes of the orchestra floor with a very pleasant sense of being somebody among other somebodies. The orchestra played a swinging air, to which his foot kept tap, and presently the curtain went up and the show was on with a rush of girls and colour.

It was an entirely new experience. From the upper gallery the actors and actresses always seemed more or less impersonal and abstract, but here they were living, palpitating human beings, almost within hand reach, certainly within eye reach, as Dave presently discovered. There was a trooping of girls about the stage, with singing and rippling laughter and sweet, clear voices; then a sudden change of formation flung a line of girls right across behind the footlights, where they tripped merrily through motions of mingled grace and acrobatics. Dave found himself regarding the young woman immediately before him; all in white she was, with some scintillating material that sparkled in the glare of the spot-light; then suddenly she was in orange, and pink, and purple, and mauve, and back again in white. And although she performed the various steps with smiling abandon, there was in her dress and manner a modesty which fascinated the boy with a subtlety which a more reckless appearance would have at once defeated.

And then Dave looked in her face. It was a pretty face, notwithstanding its grease-paint, and it smiled right into his eyes. His heart thumped between his shoulders as though it would drive all the air from his lungs. She smiled at him—for him! Now they were away again; there were gyrations about the stage, he almost lost her in the maze; a young man in fine clothes rushed in, and was apparently being mobbed by the girls, and said some lines in a rapid voice which Dave's ear had not been trained to catch; and then he danced about with one of them—with the very one—with his one! My, how nimble she was! He wondered if she knew the young man very well. They seemed very friendly. But he supposed she had to do that anyway; it was part of her job; it was all in the play. Certainly the young man was very clever, but he didn't like his looks. Certainly he

could dance very well. "I could make him dance different to the tune of a six-shooter," Dave said to himself, and then flushed a little. That was silly. The young man was paid to do this, too. Still it looked like a very good job. It looked like a very much better job than shovelling coal for Metford.

Then there was a sudden break-away in the dance, and the girl disappeared behind a forest, and the mobbing of the young man recommenced. Dave supposed she had gone to rest; dancing like that must be hard on the wind. He found little to interest him now in what was going on on the stage. It seemed rather foolish. They were just capering around and being foolish. They were a lot of second-raters. And the young man—it was plain he didn't care a whit for them; he was just doing it because he had to. There was a vacant seat in front. He wished the girl behind the forest would come down and rest there. Then she could see the show herself. Then she could see —

But there was a whirr from the forest, and the girl re-appeared, this time all in red, but not nearly so much in red as she had previously been in white. My, what a quick change she had made! And how her skirt stood out like a rim when she whirled herself! And the young man left all the rest and went to dance with her again. Dave was not altogether pleased with that turn of events. But presently the dance broke up, and they were flung again in line across the stage. And there she was, all in red—no, not all in red, but certainly not in any other colour—right before him. And then she looked down and smiled again at him. And he smiled back. And then he looked at Conward and saw him smiling, too. And then he felt a very distressing uncertainty, which brought the colour slowly to his face. He resolved to say nothing, but watch. And his observations convinced him that the smiles had been for Conward, not for him. And then he lost interest in the play.

They hustled into their overcoats to the playing of the National Anthem. "Hurry," said Conward, "let's get out quick. Ain't she some dame? There—through the side exit—the stage door is that way. She promised to have her chum with her—they'll be waiting if we don't hurry."

Conward steered him to the stage entrance, where a little group was already congregated. In a moment the girl appeared, handsomely dressed in furs. Dave would not have known her, but Conward recognized her at once, and stepped forward. With her was another girl, also from the chorus, but Dave could not recall her part. He was suddenly aware of being introduced.

"This is my friend Belton," Conward was saying. Dave was about to correct him when Conward managed to whisper, "Whist! Your stage name. Mine's Elward. Don't forget."

Conward took the first girl by the arm, and Dave found himself following rapidly with the other. They cut through certain side streets, up a stairway, and into a dark hall. Conward was rattling keys and swearing amiably in his soft voice. Presently a door opened; Conward pressed a button, and they found themselves in a small but comfortably furnished room—evidently bachelor apartments.

The girls threw off their wraps and sauntered about the place, commenting freely on the furnishings and decorations, while Conward started a gas grate and put some water to boil.

"Sorry I've nothing for you to eat," he said, "but I've some good medicine for the thirst."

"Eating's poor business when there's a thirst to be quenched," said one of the girls, with a yawn. "And believe me, I've a long one."

Conward pulled a table into the centre of the room, set chairs about, and produced glasses and a bottle. Dave experienced a sudden feeling as of a poor swimmer beyond his depth. He had never drunk, not even beer, not so much from principles of abstinence as from disgust over his father's drunkenness and enmity towards the means of it...

The glasses were filled and raised. "Ho!" said Conward.

"Here's looking!" said one of the girls. Dave still hesitated, but the other girl clinked her glass against his. "Here's looking at you," she said, and she appeared to lay special emphasis on the last two words. Certainly her eyes were on Dave's as she raised her glass to her lips. And under the spell of those eyes he raised his glass and drained it.

Other glasses were filled and drained. The three were chattering away, but Dave was but vaguely conscious of their talk, and could weave no connected meaning into it. His head was buzzing with a pleasant dreamy sensation. A very grateful warmth surrounded him, and with it came a disposition to go to sleep. He probably would have gone to sleep had his eye not fallen on a picture on the wall. It was a picture of a girl pointing her finger at him. He suspected that she was pointing it at him, and as he looked more closely he became very sure of it... No girl could point her finger at him. He arose and made a lunge across the room. He missed her, and with difficulty retraced his steps to the table to make a fresh start.

"She's makin' fun of me," he said, "an' I don't stand for that. Nobody can do that with me. Nobody—see? I don't 'low it."

"Oh, you don't," laughed one of the girls, running into a corner and pointing a finger at him. "You don't?"

He turned his attention to her, steadying himself very carefully before he attempted an advance. Then, with wide-stretched arms, he bore down cautiously upon her. When he had her almost within reach she darted along the edge of the room. He attempted a sudden change in direction, which ended disastrously, and he found himself very much sprawled out upon the floor. He was aware of laughter, but what cared he? He was disposed to sleep. What better place to sleep than this? What better time to sleep than this? In a moment he was lost to all consciousness....

It was later in the night when he felt himself being dragged into a sitting posture. He remonstrated in a mumbling voice. "S too early," he said. "Altogether too early. Early. Whew! Watch 'er spin. Jus' his job. Paid for it, ain't he?"

"Well, I ain't paid for this," said Conward, rather roughly, "and you got to pull yourself together. Here, take a little of this; it'll put some gimp into you." He pressed a glass to his lips, and Dave swallowed.

"Where am I?" he said, blinking at the light.

He rose uncertainly to his feet and stared about the room in returning consciousness.

"Where's the girls?" he asked.

"Gone," said Conward, sulkily. "Couldn't expect 'em to stick around all night to say good bye, could you, and you sleeping off your drunk?"

Dave raised his hand to his head. A sense of disgrace was already upon him. Then he suddenly turned in anger on Conward.

"You put this up on me," he cried. "You made a fool of me. I've a mind to bash your skull in for you."

"Don't be silly," Conward retorted. "I didn't enjoy it any more than you did—introducing you as my friend, and then have you go out like that. Why didn't you tip me? I didn't know it would put you to sleep."

"Neither did I," said Dave.

"Well, the next thing is to get you home. Can you walk?"

"Sure." Dave started for the door, but his course suddenly veered, and he found himself leaning over a chair. Conward helped him into his overcoat, and half led, half shoved him to his boarding house.

CHAPTER SIX

Elden awoke Sunday morning with a feeling that his head had been boiled. Also he had a prodigious thirst, which he slacked [Transcriber's note: slaked?] at the water pitcher. It was the practice of Metford's gang to select one of their number to care for all the horses on Sundays, while the others enjoyed the luxury of their one day of leisure. In consequence of this custom the room was still full of snoring sleepers, and the air was very close and foul.

Dave sat down by the little table that fronted the open window and rested his head on his hands. It was early spring; the snow was gone; dazzling sunshine bathed the prairies in the distance, and near at hand were the twitter of birds and the ripple of water. It was a day to be alive and about.

But the young man's thoughts were not of the sunshine, nor the fields, nor the water. He was recalling, with considerable effort, the events of the previous night; piecing them together in impossible ways; re-assorting them until they offered some sequence. The anger he had felt toward Conward had subsided, but the sting of shame rankled in his heart. He had no doubt that he had furnished the occasion for much merriment upon the part of the young women, in which, quite probably, Conward had joined.

"Fool," he said to himself. And because he could think of no more specific expression to suit his feelings, and because expression of any kind brought a sort of relief, he kept on repeating the word, "Fool, fool, fool!" And as his self-condemnation gradually won him back to a sense of perspective he became aware of the danger of his position. He went over the events of the recent months, and tried to be rational. He had left his ranch home to better himself, to learn things, to rise to be somebody. He had worked harder than ever before, at more disagreeable employment; he had lived in conditions that were almost nauseating, and what had he learned? That you can't beat a card man at his own game, price sixty dollars, and that the gallery seats are cheaper, and

sometimes safer, than the orchestra.

Then all of a sudden he thought of Reenie. He had not thought of her much of late; he had been so busy in the days, and so tired at nights, that he had not thought of her much. True, she was always in the back of his mind; in his subconscious mind, perhaps, but he seemed to have put her away, like his skill with revolver and lasso. Now she burst upon him again with all that beauty and charm which had so magnetised him in those glad, golden days, and the frank cleanness of her girlhood made him disgusted and ashamed. It was to fit himself for her that he had come to town, and what sort of mess was he making of it? He was going down instead of up. He had squandered his little money, and now he was squandering his life. He had been drunk...

Dave's nature was one in which emotions were accelerated with their own intensity. When he was miserable his misery left no place in his soul for any ray of sunshine. It fed on itself, and grew to amazing proportions. It spread out from its original cause and enveloped his whole life. It tintured all his relationships, past, present and future. When a cloud of gloom settled upon him he felt that it would never lift, but became heavier and heavier until he was crushed under its weight. And the sudden manner in which Reenie had now invaded his consciousness intensified the blackness in which he was submerged, as lightning darkens the storm. He saw her on that last night, with the moonlight wooing her white face, until his own body had eclipsed it in a warmer passion, and he heard her words, "I know you are true and clean."

True and clean. "Yes, thank God, I am still that!" he cried, springing suddenly to his feet and commencing to dress. "I've been spattered, but nothing that won't wash off. Perhaps," and he stopped as the great thought struck him, "perhaps it was the luckiest thing in the world that the booze did put me out last night... It'll wash off."

There was considerable comfort in this thought. He had wasted some precious months, but he had not gone too far, and there was still time to turn back. But he must begin work at once on the serious business of life. With this resolve his spirits returned with a rush, and he found himself whistling as he completed his toilet. There was no breakfast for the late sleepers Sunday mornings, and he went at once into the warm air outside. The sunshine fondled his body, his limbs, his face; the spring ozone was in his lungs; it was good to be alive. Alive—for a purpose. Well, he would start at once; how could he begin a life of purpose to-day? He was quite set on the necessity of doing something, but quite at sea as to what that something should be. It occurred to him for the first time that society had been much more generous in supplying facilities for a boy to go down hill than to go up.

He became aware of a bell ringing. At first the sound had fallen only on his subconsciousness, but gradually he became aware of it, as one being slowly recalled from sleep. Then he remembered that it was Sunday, and that was a church bell. He had often heard them on Sundays. He was about to dismiss the matter when a strange impulse came into his mind. Why not go to church? He had never been in church, and he felt that the surroundings of the pool hall would be much more congenial. He had little stomach for church. What if the rest of the gang should learn he had been at church?

"I believe you're afraid to go," he said to himself. That settled it. In a few minutes he was at the church door, where an oldish man, after surveying him somewhat dubiously, gave him a formal handshake and passed him into the hands of an usher. The usher led him down an aisle and crowded him into a small pew with several others. There were many unoccupied pews, so Dave concluded it must be a church policy to fill them full as far as they went. He also observed that the building was filling up from the rear, notwithstanding the efforts of the ushers to cajole the people farther down the aisles. Dave reflected that the custom here was quite different from the theatre, especially the "rush" gallery, where every one scrambled for the front seats.

He was very conscious of being observed, and there was an atmosphere of formality and, as it seemed to him, of strained goodness that made him uncomfortable. But presently the organ commenced and diverted his interest from himself. It was very wonderful. His position commanded a view of the organist, and Dave marvelled at the manner in which that gentleman's feet hopped about, and how his hands flourished up and down, and occasionally jumped from the keyboard altogether to jerk out a piece of the machine.

Then the choir filed in. They were all dressed alike, and the men had on a kind of gown. Dave thought that was very silly. By some mental freak he found himself picturing a man with a gown roping a steer, and it was only by a sudden tightening of his jaws that he prevented an explosion of amusement. He was still feeling very happy over this when a tall man entered from a side door and ascended the steps to the pulpit. He moved very solemnly, and, when he sat down, rested his head on his hand for a minute. Then he looked over the audience, and Dave thought that his expression was one of approval. Then he looked at the ceiling.

"He feels safe in his seat," thought Dave. "No buckin' in this bunch. Well—"

The organ had broken forth in a great burst of sound and every one was standing up. Dave did so too, belatedly. Then everybody sang. They seemed to know just what to sing. It was all new to Dave, but it sounded all right. It made him feel just like the sunshine did after the stuffy room. Then they all sat down. Dave was becoming more alert, and was not caught napping in this movement.

There was a short prayer, which Dave did not understand, and more singing by everybody, and then the ushers came around for the collection. Dave did not know how much to put on the plate, but he supposed a good seat like this in the theatre would cost a dollar, so he put on that amount. He noticed that his neighbour on one side put on a nickel, and on the other side nothing at all. He began to think he must have made a mistake. All this time the organ was playing boisterously, but suddenly it dropped to a low, meditative theme, and Dave began to fear it would stop altogether. But no; a young woman was standing up in the choir; she was pretty, with quite a different air and a finer comeliness than that of the theatre girls of the night before. In some vague way she seemed reminiscent of Reenie Hardy. Dave's introspection was not deep enough to know that any fine girl would remind him of Reenie Hardy.

Then she began to sing, and he felt again that the sunshine was playing about him, but this time he heard the birds, too, and the ripple of the distant water, and the stir of the spruce trees, and he could see the lattice of sunlight through their dark leaves playing on the brown grass, and there was a smell of distant wood smoke, and the glow of dying coals... He was swaying gently in his seat, held in the thrall of her voice, and suddenly he was glad he had put a dollar on the plate. He could not follow all the words, but it was something about a land where the sun would never go down. Well—no doubt the preacher would tell them more about it.

Then there was a long prayer by the preacher. He began by addressing the Deity as all mighty and all knowing, and then spent many minutes in drawing His attention to details which had evidently escaped His notice, and in offering suggestions for the better government of the universe. He dwelt on the humility and penitence of the congregation, including himself, and at this point Dave's unorthodox ear began to detect a false note. He looked about from preacher to congregation, and saw no evidence of penitence or humility. "If God is all-knowin'," said Dave to himself, "that preacher is goin' to get in wrong. Why, he couldn't put over that humility bunk on me."

At length it seemed that the sermon was really going to commence, but a well dressed man came down the aisle and read a long financial statement. Dave gathered from it that the Lord was pretty hard pressed for ready cash. "No wonder," thought he, "if they all give nickels and nothin's. Pretty well dressed bunch, too."

Finally the preacher took the meeting in hand again, and announced his text, but Dave soon forgot it in trying to follow the sermon. It was an orthodox exposition of the doctrine of the atonement. Dave would not have known it by that name, and there were many expressions which he could not understand, but out of a maze of phrases he found himself being slowly shocked into an attitude of uncompromising hostility. There was no doubt about it; the preacher was declaring that an innocent One had been murdered that the guilty might go free. This was bad enough, but when the speaker went on to say that this was God's plan; that there had to be a sacrifice, and that no other sacrifice was sufficient to appease the wrath of Jehovah directed toward those whom He had created, Dave found himself boiling with indignation. If this was Christianity he would have none of it. His instruction in religion had been of the most meagre nature, but he had imbibed some conception of a Father who was love, and this doctrine of the sacrifice of the innocent crashed through all his slender framework of belief. Had he been told of a love which remained steadfast to its ideals even at the cost of Calvary his manliness would have responded as to the touch of a kindred spirit, but the attempt to fit that willing sacrifice into a dogmatic creed left him adrift and rudderless. Suddenly from somewhere in his memory came the words, "Then what becomes of the justice of God?" It was Reenie Hardy who had asked that question. And he recalled his answer, "I don't know nothin' about the justice of God. All I know is the crittur 'at can't run gets caught." Was he then in sympathy with this doctrine of cruelty, without knowing it? No. No! Reenie Hardy had believed in justice, and he would believe in the same. He rose from his seat and walked down the aisle and out of the building, oblivious to the eyes that followed him.

His feet led him to the river, running brown with the mud of spring. He sat on the gravel, in the warm sunshine, and tossed pebbles into the swift-flowing water... He had determined on a new road, but how was he to find the road? Environment had never been kind to him, and he was just beginning to realize its power in shaping his destinies. He was dissatisfied, but he did not know where to find satisfaction; he was bewildered, and nowhere was a clear path before him. He was lonely. He knew a room where a little game would be in progress; he arose, brushed the gravel-dust from his Sunday clothes, and wended his way down town.

A crowd was entering the theatre which he had attended the night before. He looked at it wonderingly, as by statute the theatres were closed on Sundays. Still, it was evident something was going on, and he went in with the others. No tickets were required, and an usher showed him to a good seat.

It was not long before Dave realized that he was in a Socialist meeting. He knew rather less of Socialism than he did of Christianity, but the atmosphere of the place appealed to him. They were mostly men in working clothes, with tobacco or beer on their breaths, and in their loud whisperings he caught familiar profanities which made him feel at home. When the speaker said something to their liking, they applauded him; when he crossed them they denounced him openly. Interruptions were frequent, and sometimes violent, but Dave admired the spirit of fair play which gave every man a chance to speak his mind. Through it all he gathered that there were two great forces in the world; Capital and Labour, and that Capital was a selfish monster

with a strangle-hold on Labour and choking him to death. No, not quite to death, either, for Capital needed Labour, and therefore only choked him until he was half dead. Also, there were two classes of people in the world; the Masters and the Slaves. Dave was a Slave. He had never known it before, but the speaker made it quite apparent.

"But I'm not a slave," said Dave, suddenly springing to his feet. "I can quit my job to-morrow, and tell my boss to go to hell."

There were boos and cat-calls, but at last the man on the platform made himself heard.

"And what will you do, my friend, after you have quit your job?" he asked, quite courteously.

"Get another one," said Dave, without scenting the trap. "There's lots of jobs."

"That is, you would get another master," said the Socialist. "You would still have a master. And as long as you have a master, you are a slave." And Dave sat down, confused and wondering.

After the main address there was a sort of free-for-all. Half a dozen sprang to their feet, each seeking to out-talk his neighbour, and it was with difficulty the chairman obtained order and established a sequence of events. An old man in the gallery read loudly from Victor Hugo while a speaker in the orchestra declaimed on Single Tax. Finally the old man was silenced, and Dave began to learn that all the economic diseases to which society is heir might be healed by a potion compounded by Henry George. Another in the audience started to speak of the failure of the established system of marriage, embellishing his argument with more than one local incident of a salacious nature, but he was at last required to give place to a woman who had a more personal grievance to present.

"You talk about your masters and your slaves, and your taxes and your marriages," she cried in a shrill voice that penetrated every corner of the building. "I can tell you something about masters and slaves. I'm hearing everywhere that what this country wants is population; that is the talk of the politician, and the learned men, that are supposed to know. Now, what is the country doing for those that bring the population—not from the slums of Europe, that is not what I'm asking—but for those that bring the native-born population—the only population that doesn't have to be naturalized? I'm the mother of six, and what has the country done for me, but leave me at the mercy of those who charge more for an hour's attendance than my old man can save from a month's drudgery? And then, with my health broken down—in the service of the State—I have to go to the hospital, and they tell me I must have an operation, and I wake up with a horrid pain and a bill for a hundred and fifty dollars. All done in an hour, or less, and that's the bill, or part of it, for the hospital dues and the extras and etceteras are still to come. Masters and slaves! More than I can save in a year, or two years, and no one to say whether the work was needed or not, or whether it was well done or not. When my kitchen pipes are plugged a plumber fixes them and charges me a dollar, and if he doesn't do it right he has to do it over again, but when the human pipes go wrong the man-plumber charges a hundred and fifty dollars, and if he doesn't do it right he collects just the same, and the undertaker adds another hundred. Now I don't know whether this comes under the head of Capital or Labour or Single Tax, but I do know it is outrageous extortion—extortion of blood money, imposed by the wealthy and prosperous on the poor and the sick and the unfortunate, and while the State clamours for population it does not raise a finger to protect those who are bringing the native-born."

During this philippic Dave had turned toward the woman; her thin face still wore marks of refinement and even his uncultured ear recognized a use of English that indicated a fair degree of education. But she was broken; crushed with the joint cares of motherhood and poverty, and desperate at the injustices of a system that capitalized her sacrifices. He had heard much talk of slaves, but here, he felt, he saw one, not in the healthy, well fed men with their deep mutterings against employers, but in this haggard woman from whose life the lamp of joy had gone out in the bitterness of suffering and physical exhaustion.

He spent the rest of the day alone, thinking. He was not yet sure of any road, but he knew that his mind had been made to think, and that his life was bigger that night than it had been in the morning. He might not find the right road at once, but he could at least leave the old one. He felt a strange hunger to understand all that had been said. He felt, also, a tremendous sense of his own ignorance; tremendous, but not crushing; a realization that the world was full of things to be learned; problems to be faced; conclusions to be studied out, and underneath was a sense almost of exaltation that he should take some part in the studies and perhaps aid in the solutions. It was his first glimpse into the world of reason, and it charmed and invited him. He would follow.

He went early to bed, thinking over all he had heard. His mind was full, but it was happy, and, in some strange way, fixed. Even the morning service came back with a sense of worthwhileness as he recalled it in the semi-consciousness of approaching sleep... The music had been good. It had made him think of spring and the deep woods ... and water ... and wood smoke...

It was about a far away land ... and Reenie Hardy. She was very like Reenie Hardy...

CHAPTER SEVEN

Fortunate Fate, or whatever good angel it is that sometimes drops unexpected favours, designed that young Elden should the following day deliver coal at the home of Mr. Melvin Duncan. Mr. Duncan, tall, quiet, and forty-five, was at work in his garden as Dave turned the team in the lane and backed them up the long, narrow drive connecting with the family coal-chute. As the heavy wagon moved straight to its objective Mr. Duncan looked on with approval that heightened into admiration. Dave shovelled his load without remark, but as he stood for a moment at the finish wiping the sweat from his coal-grimed face Mr. Duncan engaged him in conversation.

"You handle a team like you were born to it," he said. "Where did you get the knack?"

"Well, I came up on a ranch," said Dave. "I've lived with horses ever since I could remember."

"You're a rancher, eh?" queried the older man. "Well, there's nothing like the range and the open country. If I could handle horses like you there isn't anything would hold me in town."

"Oh, I don't know," Dave answered. "You get mighty sick of it."

"Did you get sick of it?"

Elden shot a keen glance at him. The conversation was becoming personal. Yet there was in Mr. Duncan's manner a certain kindness, a certain appeal of sincere personality, that disarmed suspicion.

"Yes, I got sick of it," he said. "I lived on that ranch eighteen years, and never was inside school or church. Wouldn't that make you sick?... So I beat it for town."

"And I suppose you are attending church regularly now, and night school, too?"

Dave's quick temper fired up in resentment, but again the kindness of the man's manner disarmed him. He was silent for a moment, and then he said, "No, I ain't. That's what makes me sick now. I came in here intendin' to get an education, an' I've never even got a start at it, excep' for some things perhaps wasn't worth the money. There always seems to be somethin' else—in ahead."

"There always will be," said Mr. Duncan, "until you start."

"I suppose so," said Dave, wearily, and took up the reins.

But Mr. Duncan persisted. "You're not in such a hurry with that team," he said. "Even if you are late—even if you should lose your job over it—that's nothing to settling this matter of getting started with an education."

"But how's it to be done?" Dave questioned, with returning interest. "Schools an' books cost money, an' I never save a dollar."

"And never will," said Mr. Duncan, "until you start. But I think I see a plan that might help, and if it appeals to you it will also be a great convenience to me. My wife likes to go driving Sundays, and sometimes on weekday evenings, but I have so many things on hand I find it hard to get out with her. My daughter used to drive, but these new-fangled automobiles are turning the world upside down—and many a buggy with it. They're just numerous enough to be dangerous. If there were more or less they would be all right, but just now every horse is suspicious of them. Well—as I saw you driving in here I said to myself, 'There's the man for that job of mine, if I can get him,' but I'm not rich, and I couldn't pay you regular wages. But if I could square the account by helping with your studies a couple of nights a week—I used to teach school, and haven't altogether forgotten—why, that would be just what I want. What do you say?"

"I never saw anything on four feet I couldn't drive," said Dave, "an' if you're willing to take a chance, I am. When do we start?"

"First lesson to-night. Second lesson Thursday night. First drive Sunday." Mr. Duncan did not explain that he wanted to know the boy better before the drives were commenced, and he felt that two nights together would satisfy him whether he had found the right man.

Dave hurried back to the coal-yard and completed the day's work in high spirits. It seemed he was at last started on a road that might lead somewhere. After supper he surprised his fellow labourers by changing to his Sunday clothes and starting down a street leading into the residential part of the town. There were speculations that he had "seen a skirt."

Mr. Duncan met him at the door and showed him into the living-room. Mrs. Duncan, plump, motherly, lovable in the mature womanliness of forty, greeted him cordially. She was sorry Edith was out; Edith had a tennis engagement. She was apparently deeply interested in the young man who was to be her coachman. Dave had never been in a home like this, and his eyes,

unaccustomed to comfortable furnishings, appraised them as luxury. There were a piano and a phonograph; leather chairs; a fireplace with polished bricks that shone with the glow of burning coal; thick carpets, springy to the foot; painted pictures looking down out of gilt frames. And Mr. Duncan had said he was not rich! And there was more than that; there was an air, a spirit, an atmosphere that Dave could feel although he could not define it; a sense that everything was all right. He soon found himself talking with Mrs. Duncan about horses, and then about his old life on the ranch, and then about coming to town. Almost, before he knew it, he had told her about Reenie Hardy, but he had checked himself in time. And Mrs. Duncan had noticed it, without comment, and realized that her guest was not a boy, but a man.

Then Mr. Duncan talked about gardening, and from that to Dave's skill in backing his team to the coal-chute, and from that to coal itself. Dave had shovelled coal all winter, but he had not thought about coal, except as something to be shovelled and shovelled. And as Mr. Duncan explained to him the wonderful provisions of nature; how she had stored away in the undiscovered lands billions of tons of coal, holding them in reserve until the world's supply of timber for fuel should be nearing exhaustion, and as he told of the immeasurable wealth of this great new land in coal resources, and of how the wheels of the world, traffic and industry, and science, even, were dependent upon coal and the man who handled coal, Dave felt his breast rising with a sense of the dignity of his calling. It was no longer dirty and grimy; it was part of the world; it was essential to progress and happiness—more essential than gold, or diamonds, or all the beautiful things in the store windows. And he had had to do with this wonderful substance all winter, and not until to-night had it fired the divine spark of his imagination. The time ticked on, and although he was eager to be at work he almost dreaded the moment when Mr. Duncan should mention his lesson. But before that moment came there was a ripple of laughter at the door, and a girl in tennis costume, and a young man a little older than Dave, entered.

"Edith," said Mrs. Duncan. Dave arose to shake hands, but then his eyes fell full on her face. "Oh, I know you," he exclaimed. "I heard you sing yesterday."

Slowly he felt the colour coming to his cheeks. Had he been too familiar? Should he have held that back? What would she think? But then he felt her hand in his, and he knew it was all right.

"And I know you," she was saying. "I saw you—" she stopped, and it was her turn to feel the rising colour.

"Yes, I know what you saw," he took up her thought. "You saw me get up and go out of church because I wouldn't sit and listen to a man say that God punished the innocent to let the guilty go free. And I won't." There was a moment's silence following this outburst, and Mr. Duncan made a new appraisal of his pupil. Then it was time to introduce Mr. Allan Forsyth. Mr. Forsyth shook hands heartily, but Dave was conscious of being caught in one quick glance which embraced him from head to heel. And the glance was satisfied—self-satisfied. It was such a glance as Dave might give a horse, when he would say, "A good horse, but I can handle him." It was evident from that glance that Forsyth had no fear of rivalry from that quarter. And having no fear he could afford to be friendly.

Dave had no distinct remembrance of what happened just after that, but he was conscious of an overwhelming desire to hear Miss Duncan sing. How like Reenie she was! And just as he was beginning to think Mr. Duncan must surely have forgotten his lesson, he heard her asking him if she should sing. And then he saw Forsyth at the piano—why couldn't he leave her to do it herself, the butt-in?—and then he heard her fine, silvery voice rising in the notes of that song about the land where the sun should never go down... And suddenly he knew how lonely, how terribly, terribly lonely he was. And he sat with head bowed that they might not know...

And then there were other songs, and at last Mrs. Duncan, who had slipped away unnoticed, returned with a silver teapot, and cups of delicate china, and sandwiches and cake, and they sat about and ate and drank and talked and laughed. And Edith refilled his cup and sat down beside him, leaving that Forsyth quite on the opposite side of the room. And suddenly he was very, very happy. And when he looked at his watch it was eleven o'clock!

"I guess we didn't get any lesson to-night," he said, as he shook hands with Mr. Duncan at the sidewalk.

"I am not so sure," replied his tutor. "The first thing for you to learn is that all learning does not come from books. A good listener can learn as much as a good reader—if he listens to the right kind of people." And as Dave walked home the thought deepened in him that it really had been a lesson, and that Mr. Duncan had intended it that way. And he wondered what remarkable fortune had been his. The air was full of the perfume of balm-o'-gilead, and his feet were light with the joy of youth. And he thought much of Edith, and of Reenie Hardy.

In subsequent lessons Dave was rapidly initiated into many matters besides parlour manners and conversation. Mr. Duncan placed the first and greatest emphasis upon learning to write, and to write well. They had many philosophic discussions, in which the elder man sought to lead the younger to the acceptance of truths that would not fail him in the strain of later life, and when a conclusion had been agreed upon, it was Mr. Duncan's habit to embody it in a copy for Dave's writing lesson. One evening they had a long talk on success, and Mr. Duncan had gradually stripped the glamour from wealth and fame and social position. "The only thing worth while," he

said, "is to give happiness. The man who contributes to the happiness of the world is a success, and the man who does not contribute to the happiness of the world is a failure, no matter what his wealth or position. Every man who lives long enough, and has brains enough, comes to know this in time. And those who have not brains enough to know it, are the greatest failures of all, because they think they have attained success, and they have only been buncoed with a counterfeit."

"But a man who has money is in a position to give more happiness than one who hasn't," objected Dave. "Think of all the things a man with a million dollars can do to make people happy—like paying for libraries, and giving excursions to poor children, and things like that. So, in order to make people happy, wouldn't the first step be to make money, so it could be spent in that way?"

"That is a good thought," agreed Mr. Duncan, "but not a conclusive one. In reckoning the happiness a man gives we must, of course, subtract the unhappiness he occasions. He may make a great sum of money, and use much of it in creating happiness, but if in the making of the money he used methods that resulted in unhappiness, we must subtract the unhappiness first before we can give him any credit for the happiness he has created. And I am disposed to think that many a philanthropist, if weighed in that balance, would be found to have a debit side bigger than his credit. No matter how much wealth a man may amass, or how wisely he may distribute it, we cannot credit him with success if he has oppressed the hireling or dealt unfairly with his competitors or the public. Such a man is not a success; he is a failure. In his own soul he knows he is a failure, that is, provided he still has a soul, and if not, as I said before, he is a greater failure still."

Out of this discussion Mr. Duncan evolved the copy line, "The success of a life is in direct proportion to its net contribution to human happiness," and Dave sat writing it far into the night.

As soon as Dave had learned to read a little Mr. Duncan took him one day to the public library, and the young man groped in amazement up and down the great rows of books. Presently a strange sense of inadequateness came over him. "I can never read all of those books, nor half of them," he said. "I suppose one must read them in order to be well informed."

Mr. Duncan appeared to change the subject.

"You like fruit?" he asked.

"Yes, of course. Why—"

"When you go into a fruit store do you stand and say, 'I can never eat all of that fruit; crates and crates of it, and carloads more in the warehouse?' Of course you don't. You eat enough for the good of your system, and let it go at that. Now, just apply the same sense to your reading. Read enough to keep your mind fresh, and alert, and vigorous; give it one new thought to wrestle with every day, and let the rest go... Oh, I know that there is a certain school which holds that unless you have read this author or that author, or this book or that book, you are hopelessly uninformed or behind the times. That's literary snobbery. Let them talk. A mind that consumes more than it can assimilate is morally on a par with a stomach that swallows more than it can digest. Gluttons, both of them. Read as much as you can think about, and no more. The trouble with many of our people is that they do not read to think, but to save themselves the trouble of thinking. The mind, left to itself, insists upon activity. So they chloroform it."

Mr. Duncan also took occasion to speak with Dave about his religious views. He did not forget Dave's explanation of why he went out of the church. "I sympathize with your point of view a great deal," he said, "but don't be too sweeping in your conclusions. The church is too fussy over details; too anxious to fit the mind of man—which is his link with the Infinite—into some narrow, soul-crushing creed; too insistent upon the form of belief and not nearly insistent enough upon conduct. It makes me think of a man who was trying to sell me an automobile the other day. He was explaining all about the trimmings; the cushions and the lights and the horn and all that sort of stuff, and when he was through I said, 'Now tell me something about the motor. I want to know about the thing that makes the wheels go round. If it's no good I guess the trimmings are only fit for junk.' Well, that's the way with the church. The motor that has kept it running for nineteen centuries is the doctrine of love; love of man to man, love of man to God, love of God to man. Nothing about wrath—that's only a back-fire—but love. Without that motor all the trimmings are junk. Each sect has its own trimmings, but they all profess to use the same motor... Still, the motor is all right, even if it is neglected and abused. I don't think you'll find a better, and you must have power of some kind."

"What about Socialism?" asked Dave.

"Very good, insofar as it is constructive. But there is a destructive brand of Socialism which seizes the fancy of disappointed and disgruntled men and women, and bids them destroy. There is a basic quality in all human nature which clamours for destruction. You see it in the child pulling his toys to pieces, or in the mob wrecking buildings. Destruction is easy and passionate, but construction demands skill and patience."

"I have been at some of their meetings," said Dave. "They lay great stress on the war between

"Between husband and wife in the family of production," interrupted Mr. Duncan. "Nothing is to be gained by that quarrel. I admit the husband has been overbearing, offensive, brutal, perhaps; but the wife has been slovenly, inefficient, shallow. Neither has yet been brought to realize how hopeless is the case of one without the other. And I don't think they will learn that by quarreling. What they need is not hard words, but mutual respect and sympathy, and an honest conception of what constitutes success. Doctrines and policies are helpful to the extent to which they cause men to think, either directly, or by creating environment conducive to thought; but they will never bring the golden age of happiness. That can come only through the destruction of selfishness, which can be destroyed only by the power of love. That is why I emphasized the motor, in our talk about the church. It is our only chance."

Dave's talks with Mr. Duncan became almost nightly occurrences, either at the Duncan home, or when he drove the family—for the master of the house often accompanied them—or when they met down town, as frequently happened. And the boy was not slow to realize the broad nature of the task to which Mr. Duncan had set himself. His education was to be built of every knowledge and experience that could go into the rounding of a well-developed life.

The climax seemed to be reached when Mr. Duncan invited Dave to accompany him to a dinner at which a noted thinker, just crossing the continent, had consented to speak.

"It will be evening dress," said Mr. Duncan. "I suppose you are hardly fitted out that way?"

"I guess not," said Dave, smiling broadly. He recalled the half humorous sarcasm with which the Metford gang referred to any who might be seen abroad in their "Hereford fronts." He had a sudden vision of himself running the gauntlet of the ridicule.

But Mr. Duncan was continuing. "I think I can fix you up," he said. "We must be pretty nearly of a size, and I have a spare suit." And almost before he knew it it was arranged that Dave should attend the dinner.

It was an eventful night for him. His shyness soon wore off, for during these months he had been learning to accept any new experience gladly. "Life is made up of experience," his teacher had said, "therefore welcome every opportunity to broaden your life by travelling in new tracks. There are just two restrictions—the injurious and the immoral. You must grow by experience, but be sure you grow the right way. Only a fool must personally seize the red iron to see if it will burn... But most of us are fools." And as he sat among this company of the best minds of the town he felt that a new and very real world was opening before him. His good clothes seemed to work up in some way through his sub-consciousness and give him a sense of capability. He was in the mental atmosphere of men who did things, and by conforming to their customs he had brought his mind into harmony with theirs, so that it could receive suggestions, and—who knows?—return suggestions. And he was made to think, think, think.

As he walked home with Mr. Duncan under the stars he spoke of the subtle sense of well-being and ability which came with good clothes. "I don't mind confessing I have always had something like contempt for stylish dressing," he said. "Now I almost feel that there's something to it."

"There is some good quality in everything that survives," said Mr. Duncan. "Otherwise it would not survive. That doesn't mean, of course, that the good qualities outweigh the bad, but the good must be there. Take the use of liquor, for instance; perhaps the greatest source of misery we have. Yet it touches a quality in man's life: sociability, conviviality, if you like; but a quality that has virtue in it none the less. And the errors of sex are so often linked with love that one can scarcely say where virtue ceases and where vice begins. I know convention placards them plainly enough, but convention does not make virtue vice, nor vice virtue. There are deeper laws down beneath, and sometimes they may set at defiance all accepted codes.

"Yet I would not quarrel with the accepted codes—until I knew I had something better. Accepted codes represent man's net progress through experience to truth. The code, for instance, 'Thou shalt not kill;' we accept it in general, but not completely. The State does not hesitate to kill in self-defence, or even to carry out purposes which have no relation to defence. And shall we not allow similar exceptions to the other codes? And yet, although we may find our codes are not infallible, are they not still the best guides we have?"

"To return to clothes. Clothes won't make you, but they will help you to make yourself. Only, don't become a clothes-tippler. You can run to intoxication on fine raiment as well as on fine wines. It has virtue in it, but just beyond the virtue lies the vice."

The summer was not far gone when Dave, through an introduction furnished by Mr. Duncan, got a new job. It was in the warehouse of a wholesale grocery, trundling cases and sacks of merchandise. It was cleaner than handling coal, and the surroundings were more congenial, and the wages were better—fifty dollars a month, to begin.

"The first thing is to get out of the dead-line," said Mr. Duncan. "I am not hoping that you will have found destiny in a wholesale warehouse, but you must get out of the dead-line. As long as you shovel coal, you will shovel coal. And you are not capable of anything better until you think you are."

"But I've liked it pretty well," said Dave. "As long as I was just working for my wages it was dull going, but it was different after I got to see that even shovelling coal was worth while. I suppose it is the same with groceries, or whatever one does. As soon as you begin to study what you handle the work loses its drudgery. It isn't a man's job that makes him sick of his job; it's what he thinks of his job."

A light of satisfaction was in his teacher's eyes as Dave made this answer. Mr. Duncan had realized that he was starting late with this pupil, and if there were any short-cuts to education he must find them. So he had set out deliberately to instil the idea that education is not a matter of schools and colleges, or courses of reading, or formulae of any kind, but a matter of the five senses applied to every experience of life. And he knew that nothing was coarse or common that passed through Dave's hands. Coal had ceased to be a smutty mineral, and had taken on talismanic qualities unguessed by the mere animal workman; and sugar, and coffee, and beans, and rice, and spices, each would open its own wonderful world before this young and fertile mind. As an heritage from his boyhood on the ranges Dave had astonishingly alert senses; his sight, his hearing, his sense of smell and of touch were vastly more acute than those of the average university graduate... And if that were true might it not fairly be said that Dave was already the better educated of the two, even if he, as yet, knew nothing of the classics?

As Dave parted from the Metford gang he felt that he knew what Mr. Duncan had meant by the dead-line. These were men who would always shovel coal, because they aspired to nothing better. There was no atom of snobbery in Dave's nature; he knew perfectly well that shovelling coal was quite as honourable and respectable a means of livelihood as managing a bank, but the man who was content to shovel coal was on the dead-line... And, by the same logic, the man who was content to manage a bank was on the dead-line. That was a new and somewhat startling aspect of life. He must discuss it with Mr. Duncan.

Dave's energy and enthusiasm in the warehouse soon brought him promotion from truck hand to shipping clerk, with an advance in wages to sixty-five dollars a month. He was prepared to remain in this position for some time, as he knew that promotion depends on many things besides ability. Mr. Duncan had warned him against the delusion that man is entirely master of his destiny. "Life, my boy," he had said, "is fifty per cent. environment and forty per cent. heredity. The other ten per cent. is yours. But that ten per cent. is like the steering gear in an automobile; it's only a small part of the mechanism, but it directs the course of the whole machine. Get a good grip on the part of your life you can control, and don't worry over the rest."

To economize both time and money Dave took his lunch with him and ate it in the warehouse. He had also become possessed of a pocket encyclopaedia and it was his habit to employ the minutes saved by eating lunch in the warehouse in reading from his encyclopaedia. It chanced one day that as he was reading in the noon hour Mr. Trapper, the head of the firm, came through the warehouse. Dave knew him but little; he thought of him as a stern, unapproachable man, and avoided him as much as possible. But this time Mr. Trapper was upon him before he was seen.

"What are you reading?" he demanded. "Yellow backed nonsense?"

"No, sir," said Dave, rising and extending his arm with the book.

"Why, what's this?" queried Mr. Trapper, in some surprise. "Tea—tea—oh, I see, it's an encyclopaedia. What is the idea, young man?"

"I always like to read up about the stuff we are handling," said Dave. "It's interesting to know all about it; where it comes from, how it is grown, what it is used for; the different qualities, and so forth."

"H'm," said Mr. Trapper, returning the book. "No doubt." And he walked on without further comment. But that afternoon he had something to say to his manager.

"That young fellow on the shipping desk—Elden, I think his name is. How do you find him?"

"Very satisfactory, sir. Punctual, dependable, and accurate."

"Watch him," said Mr. Trapper.

The manager swung around in his chair. "Why, what do you mean? You haven't occasion to suspect—?"

Mr. Trapper's customary sternness slowly relaxed, until there was the suggestion of a smile

about the corners of his mouth, and rather more than a suggestion in the twinkle in his eye.

"Do you know what I caught that young fellow doing during noon hour?" he asked. "Reading up the encyclopaedia on tea. Tea, mind you. Said he made a practice of reading up on the stuff we are handling. *We*, mind you. Found it very interesting to know where it came from, and all about it. I've been in the grocery business for pretty close to forty years, and I've seen many an employee spend his noon hour in the pool rooms, or in some other little back room, or just smoking, but this is the first one I ever caught reading up the business in an encyclopaedia. Never read it that way myself. Well—you watch him. I'd risk a ten-spot that he knows more about tea this minute than half of our travellers."

But Dave was not to continue in the grocery trade, despite his reading of the encyclopaedia, A few evenings later he was engaged in reading in the public library; not an encyclopaedia, but Shakespeare. The encyclopaedia was for such time as he could save from business hours, but for his evening reading Mr. Duncan had directed him into the realm of fiction and poetry, and he was now feeling his way through Hamlet. From the loneliness of his boyhood he had developed the habit of talking aloud to himself, and in abstracted moments he read in an audible whisper which impressed the substance more deeply on his mind, but made him unpopular in the public reading rooms. It was well known among the patrons of the rooms that he read Hamlet. This fact, however, may not have been altogether to Dave's disadvantage. On the evening in question an elderly man engaged him in conversation.

"You are a Shakespearean student, I see?"

"Not exactly. I read a little in the evenings. But I haven't gone far enough to call myself a student."

"I have seen you here different times. Are you well acquainted with the town?"

"Pretty well," said Dave, scenting that there might be a purpose in the questioning.

"Working now?"

Dave told him where he was employed.

"I am the editor of *The Call*," said the elderly man. "We need another man on the street; a reporter, you know. We pay twenty-five dollars a week for such a position. If you are interested you might call at the office tomorrow."

Dave hurried with his problem to Mr. Duncan. "I think I'd like the work," he said, "but I am not sure whether I can do it. My writing is rather—wonderful."

Mr. Duncan turned the matter over in his mind. "Yes," he said at length, "but I notice you are beginning to use the typewriter. When you learn that God gave you ten fingers, not two, you may make a typist. And there is nothing more worth while than being able to express yourself in English. They'll teach you that on a newspaper. I think I'd take it.

"Not on account of the money," he continued, after a little. "You would probably soon be earning more in the wholesale business. Newspaper men are about the worst paid of all professions. But it's the best training in the world, not for itself, but as a step to something else. I have often wondered why editors, who are forever setting every other phase of the world's work to rights, are content to train up so many thousands of bright young men—and then pass them along into other businesses where they are better paid. But the training is worth while, and it's the training you want. Take it."

Dave explained his disadvantages to the editor of *The Call*. "I didn't want you to think," he said with great frankness, "that because I was reading Shakespeare I was a master of English. And I guess if I were to write up stuff in Hamlet's language I'd get canned for it."

"We'd probably have a deputation from the Moral Reform League," said the editor, with a dry smile. "Just the same, if you know Shakespeare you know English, and we'll soon break you into the newspaper style."

So, almost before he knew it, Dave was on the staff of *The Call*. His beat comprised the police court, fire department, hotels, and general pick-ups. And the very first day, as though to afford fuel for his genius, a small fire occurred in a clothing store.

"S good for two sticks—about four inches," said the editor, when Dave had given him the main facts. "Write your story to fit."

Dave suddenly realized that, although he had been a persistent reader of newspapers during the recent months, he had scarcely the remotest idea of how many words went to a column, or to an inch. It was a piece of information needed at once, so he set about to count the words in a column. Then he wrote his story to fit. He had already learned that everything in a newspaper office, from a wedding to a ball game, is "a story." When he turned his in it looked like this:

The fire bell was heard ringing this morning about ten o'clock, and soon after crowds were seen wending their way to the Great West Clothing Store. There was a heavy black smoke coming from the back end of the store. The firemen were late in getting there, and before they arrived a man had got badly choked by trying to go into the store. Presently the engine came up and before long water was being applied in great quantities, and soon the fire was under control. Part of the roof fell in, and the building is pretty badly ruined. Some of the contents may be fit for sale. It seems too bad that the fire engine should have been so long in coming, as without doubt if it had got there promptly the fire could have been put out before much damage occurred. However, it might have been worse, as it was a frame building, in a row of other frame buildings, and if the fire had once got beyond control much damage might have been done. Nobody seems to know how the fire started.

It was with much quiet excitement that he awaited the appearance of the evening edition. He had a strange eagerness to see his contribution in print; a manifestation, no doubt, of that peculiar trait in human nature which fills the editorial waste basket with unaccepted contributions. At last he found it, but it read like this:

Fire this morning gutted the Great West Clothing Store with a loss of \$8,000.00 of which \$4,000.00 is covered by insurance in the Occidental. Frank Beecher, proprietor of the store, was overcome by smoke, and is in the city hospital.

Smoke was first seen issuing from the back of the store by Fred Grant, a delivery man for the Imperial Laundry, who turned in an alarm at 10.08. Owing to the fire team colliding with a dray owned by Sheppard & Co. some minutes of delay occurred. During this period the building, which was of frame, burned fiercely. It was almost completely destroyed, although some of the stock may be salable.

Beecher rushed into the back room for certain papers, where he was found by Fireman Carey in an unconscious condition. He is recovering, and is already planning to rebuild.

Dave read the account with a sinking heart. By the time he reached the end it seemed his heart could sink no further. He found that the editor had not left the office, so he approached him with as much spirit as he could command.

"I guess you won't need me any more," he said. "I'm sorry I made a mess of that fire story."

There was a kind twinkle in the chief's eye as he answered, "Nonsense. Of course we need you. You have merely made the mistake every one else makes, in supposing you could write for a newspaper without training. We will give you the training—and pay you while you learn. The only man we can't use is the man who won't learn. Now let me give you a few pointers," and the editor got up from his desk and held the paper with the fire story before him. "In the first place, don't start a story with 'the,' at least, not more than once or twice a week. In the second place, get the meat into the first paragraph. Seventy-five per cent. of the readers never go further than the first paragraph; give them the raw facts there; if they want the trimmings they will go down for them. That is where a magazine story is exactly opposite to a newspaper story; a newspaper story shows its hand in the first paragraph, a magazine story in the last.

"Then, get the facts. Nobody cares whether the fire bell rang or not, but they do care about the man who was suffocated; who he was, what he was doing there, what became of him. Revel in names. Get the names of everybody, and get them right. The closest tight-wad in the town will buy a paper if it has his name in it. Every story, no matter how short, is good for a number of names. In your copy as you turned it in"—the editor picked it up from his desk; he had evidently saved it for such an occasion as this—"the only name you had was that of the clothing store. I had one of the other boys get to work on the telephone, and you see he got the name of the proprietor; of the insurance company, with the amount of the insurance; of the man who turned in the alarm; of the owner of the dray team that obstructed the engine, and of the firemen who carried Beecher to safety. Every one of these people, with their families, their cousins, and their aunts, become especially interested in the story the moment their names are introduced.

"Next, remember that it is not the business of a reporter to pass editorial comment. It may have been too bad that the fire engine was delayed, but that is a matter for the editor to decide. The business of the reporter is to find out why it was delayed, and state the facts, without regrets or opinions. You must learn to hold the mirror up to nature without making faces in it. You know what I mean—keep your own reflection out of the picture. If you think the incident calls for an expression of opinion by the paper, write an editorial and submit it to me. But remember that the editorial and news columns of a paper should be as distinct as the two sides of a fence."

"Thank you very much," said Dave, slowly, when it was plain the editor had finished. "I think I begin to see. But there's one thing I don't understand. Why did you not mention the origin of the fire?"

A flicker of amusement—or was it confession?—ran across the chief's face as he answered, "Because we don't know what started it—and Beecher is one of our best advertisers. To say the

origin of the fire is unknown always leaves a smack of suspicion. It is like the almost imperceptible shrug of the shoulder at the mention of a woman's name. You can't get away from it. And it is the advertiser who keeps the paper alive... I know it's not idealism, but idealism doesn't pay wages and paper bills, and as long as readers demand papers for less than it costs to print them they will have to take second place to the advertiser."

"Then all reports are to be coloured to suit the advertiser?" demanded Dave.

"No. Where a principle is involved—and we have principles, even in these degenerate days—we stand by the principle, even if we lose the patronage. Our notions of what is for the public good have cost us a lot of money at times. You see, the exploiter is always ready to pay his servants, which is more than can be said of the public. But where no real principle is involved we try to be friendly to our friends."

With these fresh viewpoints on his profession Dave entered upon his work the following day chastened but determined. Almost immediately he found the need of acquaintanceships. The isolation of his boyhood had bred in him qualities of aloofness which had now to be overcome. He was not naturally a good "mixer;" he preferred his own company, but his own company would not bring him much news. So he set about deliberately to cultivate acquaintance with the members of the police force and the fire brigade, and the clerks in the hotels. And he had in his character a quality of sincerity which gave him almost instant admission into their friendships. He had not suspected the charm of his own personality, and its discovery, feeding upon his new-born enthusiasm for friendships, still further enriched the charm.

As his acquaintance with the work of the police force increased Dave found his attitude toward moral principles in need of frequent re-adjustment. By no means a Puritan, he had, nevertheless, two sterling qualities which so far had saved him from any very serious misstep. He practised absolute honesty in all his relationships. His father, drunken although he was in his later years, had never quite lost his sense of commercial uprightness, and Dave had inherited the quality in full degree. And Reenie Hardy had come into his life just when he needed a girl like Reenie Hardy to come into his life ... He often thought of Reenie Hardy, and of her compact with him, and wondered what the end would be. And meanwhile he found the need of frequent readjustments. He became aware of the fact that in every community there are two communities; one on the surface, respectable, discreet, conventional; and one beneath the surface, to which these terms would not apply. He found that the province of the police was not to enforce morality, but to prevent immorality becoming obnoxious. Anything, almost, might go on so long as its effects were confined to the voluntary participants. Underneath the sham of good behaviour was a world, known to the police and the newspaper men and a few others, which refused to accept standard conventions and lived according to its own impulse. And this world included so-called best citizens, of both sexes. And they *were* good citizens. It seemed the community had two natures; a sort of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde on a community basis. Splendid qualities; large heartedness, generosity, were mingled and streaked through degrees of selfishness and lust running down into positive crime... And the wonder was not what the papers printed, but what they left untold... And he was glad he had met Reenie Hardy. She was an anchor about his soul... And Edith Duncan.

One morning, as he sat with Carson of *The Times* at the reporters' table in the police court, listening absently to the clerk calling a list of names, his companion, with a grimace, intimated that there was something beneath the surface. "Pure fiction," he whispered, as the list was completed. "It would do you good to know who they are. Shining lights, every one of them. And when they are lit up they can't be kept under a bushel. The police just had to do something. They won't be here—not one of them. Their lawyer will plead guilty, and pay the fines, and every one will be sorry—they were caught. Even his nibs on the bench isn't twice as happy. It was by good luck he wasn't with the bunch himself."

It turned out as Carson predicted. One of the leading lawyers of the city addressed the Court, expressing the regret of his clients that their behaviour had necessitated interference by the police. He was full of suave assurances that no disrespect to the law, nor annoyance to any member of the community, was intended, and he pleaded feelingly for as great leniency as the court might consider consistent with the offence. The minimum fine was imposed, and the lawyer withdrew, bearing with him the double happiness of having earned a good fee and having saved a number of his personal friends from a public exposure which would have been, at least, embarrassing. As the lawyer passed the reporters' table Dave felt something pressed into his hand, and heard the whispered words, "Split it."

In his hand was a ten dollar bill. "What's the idea?" said Dave to Carson, when the session was over.

"The idea is that I get five," said Carson, "and both of us forget it. Cheap skate, he might have made it twenty. Of course the names were bogus, but they couldn't risk mention, even with that precaution. Easy picking, isn't it?"

"It doesn't look quite right," Dave faltered. "I'm here to get the news—"

"Oh, can that. You know we don't publish all the news. Why, man, we'd wreck society, or the ship of state, or whatever it is we are all floating on, if we did that. We'd have every lawyer in this

burg busy in a week, and they're making too much money already. What the world doesn't know the world doesn't grieve over. And the joke of it is, everybody thinks he's putting it over somebody else, and while he's busy thinking that somebody else is putting it over him. So they're about even in the finish. Besides, if you talk about principle, doesn't the Bible say to do unto others as you would that they should do unto you? How would you feel in their position?

"I tell you," said Carson, warming up to his subject, "this is an intricate game, this life business. Pretty seedy in spots, but, after all, most people are merely victims of circumstances. And if circumstances place a five-spot in your hand to-day, accept what the gods bring you. Tomorrow they will take it away.

"See this suit," he continued, indicating his attire, which greatly out-classed Dave's. "A friend gave me that. I get all my suits that way. When a scrap occurs in a bar-room; a booze riot, or knifing, or something goes wrong upstairs, I just mention that it took place in 'a down town hotel.' Then I order myself a suit, or something of that kind, and have the tailor send his bill to the proprietor of the joint. He pays. If he doesn't, next time I name his tavern right in the story."

"Don't you call that graft?" asked Dave.

"Graft? Nonsense! Merely an exchange of courtesies... There are others, too. You'll get wise to them in time."

But Dave was by no means satisfied with Carson's philosophy. He went to his editor with the five dollar bill and the police court incident. "What shall I do about it?" he demanded.

He fancied there was a note of impatience in the editor's reply. "Give the money to the Salvation Army," he said, "and forget about the rest. Isn't it Kipling who says 'There comes a night when the best gets tight,' and so on? We could tell the story, but what good would it do? And let me tell you, Elden, there are mighty few, men or women, who have gone half way through life without something they'd like to forget. Why not let them forget it? You're young yet, and perhaps you don't see it that way, but you'll be older. There's a verse by somebody runs like this:

"Don't take the defensive by saying
"I told only just what was true,"
For there's more at that game might be playing
If the truth were all told about you."

"That may be bad poetry, but it's good journalistic ethics."

But after Dave had gone the editor called his business manager. "I guess we'll have to raise Elden to thirty dollars a week," said he. "He's so honest he embarrasses me, and I guess I need that kind of embarrassment, or I wouldn't be embarrassed."

CHAPTER NINE

While the gradually deepening current of Dave's life flowed through the channels of coal heaver, freight hustler, shipping clerk, and reporter, its waters were sweetened by the intimate relationship which developed between him and the members of the Duncan household. He continued his studies under Mr. Duncan's directions; two, three, or even four nights in the week found him at work in the comfortable den, or, during the warm weather, on the screened porch that overlooked the family garden. His duties as reporter frequently called for attendance at public meetings devoted to all conceivable purposes, and he was at first disposed to feel unkindly toward these interruptions in his regular studies. He raised the point with Mr. Duncan.

"One thing I have been trying to drill into you," said his tutor, "is that education is not a thing of books or studies or formulae of any kind. It is the whole world; particularly the world of thought, feeling, and expression. It is not a flower in the garden of life; it is the garden itself, with its flowers, and its perfumes, and its sunshine and rain. Yes, and its weeds, and droughts, and insects and worms. There is a phase of education in the public meeting, whether its purpose be to discuss the municipal tax rate or the flora of the Rockies. You can't afford to miss any subject; but still less can you afford to miss the audiences that are interested in any subject. They are deeper than any book. There are all kinds of audiences. There is the violent audience, and the mysterious audience, and the sentimental audience, and the destructive audience, and the whimsical audience, and the hysterical audience,—and every other kind. And the funny thing is that they are all made up of much the same people. Take a sentimental audience, for instance; a few passes, and you have an hysterical audience. It is a difference of moods. We don't think enough about moods. We are all subject to moods, and yet we judge a new acquaintance by the mood he happens to be in—and the mood we happen to be in—at the time of making the acquaintanceship. Another day, in other moods, he would make a quite different impression—if the impression

already made could be effaced. I have a theory that the world's sorrow is largely a matter of moods. I don't deny the sorrow, nor the need for sorrow, nor the reality of it, but I do believe there is a mood of happiness which even the deepest sorrows cannot suppress. And the more you study people the more you will understand moods, and, perhaps, be master of your own. And the man who can, by force of his own will, determine the mood in which he will live, is master of the world."

So Dave came to realize that every incident in the reportorial round was to be assimilated for its educational value, and this lent a zest to his work which it could not otherwise have had. But the attraction of the Duncan household grew upon him, and many an hour he spent under its hospitable roof. Mrs. Duncan, motherly, and yet not too motherly—she might almost have been an older sister—appealed to the young man as an ideal of womanhood. Her soft, well modulated voice seemed to him to express the perfect harmony of the perfect home, and underneath its even tones he caught glimpses of a reserve of power and judgment not easily unbalanced. She was a woman to whom men might carry their ambitions, and women their hopes, and little children their wonderings, and all be assured of sympathetic audience and wise counsel. And as Dave's eyes would follow her healthy, handsome figure as it moved noiselessly about in her domestic duties, or as he caught the flush of beauty that still bloomed in her thoughtful face, or as at rarer intervals he plunged into the honest depths of her frank grey eyes, the tragedy of his own orphaned life bore down upon him and he rebelled that he had been denied the start which such a mother could have given him.

"I am twenty years behind myself," he would reflect, with a grim smile. "Never mind. I will do three men's work for the next ten, and then we will be even."

And there was Edith,—Edith, who had held him rapture-bound on that first Sunday in church—Edith, who had burst so unexpectedly upon his life that first evening in her father's home. He had not allowed himself any foolishness about Edith. It was evident that Edith was pre-empted, just as he was pre-empted, and the part of honour in his friend's house was to recognize the *status quo*... Still, Mr. Allan Forsyth was unnecessarily self-assured. He might have made it less evident that he was within the enchanted circle, while Dave remained outside. His complacency irritated Dave almost into rivalry. But the boon camaraderie of Edith herself checked any adventure of that kind. She checked it in two ways; by her own frank acceptance of him much as she would have accepted a brother in the household, and by her uncanny and unconscious knack of reminding him in almost every word and gesture of Reenie Hardy. She was of about the same figure as Reenie Hardy; a little slighter, perhaps; and about the same age; and she had the same quick, frank eyes. And she sang wonderfully. He had never heard Reenie sing, but in some strange way he had formed a deep conviction that she would sing much as Edith sang. He was not yet psychologist enough to know that his admiration for Edith was the reflex action to his love for the girl who had so wonderfully invaded his foothill life and so wonderfully changed the current of his destinies. In love, as in religion, man is forever setting up idols to represent his ideals... And forever finding feet of clay.

Dave was not long in discovering that his engagement as coachman was a device, born of Mr. Duncan's kindness, to enable him to accept instruction without feeling under obligation for it. When he made this discovery, he smiled quietly to himself, and pretended not to have made it. Two things were apparent after their first drive; that nothing was further from the minds of Mr. Duncan's bays than anything which called for so much exertion as a runaway, and that, even had they been so disposed, Edith was entirely competent to manage them. The girl had not lived in the foothill town since childhood without becoming something of a horse-woman. But Dave pretended not to know that he was a supernumerary. To have acted otherwise would have seemed ungrateful to Mr. Duncan. And presently the drives began to have a strange attraction of themselves.

When they drove in the two-seated buggy on Sunday afternoons the party usually comprised Mrs. Duncan and Edith, young Forsyth and Dave. Mr. Duncan was interested in certain Sunday afternoon meetings. It was Mrs. Duncan's custom to sit in the rear seat, for its better riding qualities, and it had a knack of falling about that Edith would ride in the front seat with the driver. She caused Forsyth to ride with her mother, ostensibly as a courtesy to that young gentleman,—a courtesy which, it may be conjectured, was not fully appreciated. At first he accepted it with the good nature of one who feels his position secure, but gradually that good nature gave way to a certain testiness of spirit which he could not entirely conceal. It became evident that he would have preferred other ways of spending the Sunday afternoons. The parks, for instance, or quiet walks through the cottonwoods by the river...

The crisis was precipitated one fine Sunday in September, in the first year of Dave's newspaper experience. Dave called early, and found Edith in a riding habit.

"Mother is 'indisposed,' as they say in the society page," she explained. "In other words, she doesn't wish to be bothered. So I thought we would ride to-day."

"But there are only two horses," said Dave.

"Well?" queried the girl, and there was a note in her voice that sounded strange to him. Then, after a pause in which the colour slowly rose to her cheeks, "There are only two of us."

"But Mr. Forsyth?"

"He is not here. He may not come. Will you saddle the horses and let us get away?"

It was evident to Dave that, for some reason, Edith wished to evade Forsyth this afternoon. A lover's quarrel, no doubt. That she had a preference for him, and was revealing it with the utmost frankness, never occurred to his sturdy, honest mind. One of the delights of his companionship with Edith had been that it was a real companionship. None of the limitations occasioned by any sex consciousness had narrowed the sphere of the frank friendship he felt for her. She was to him almost as another man, yet in no sense masculine. It seemed rather that her femininity was of such purity that, like the atmosphere he breathed, it surrounded him, flooded him without exciting consciousness of its existence. Save for a certain tender delicacy which her womanhood inspired, he came and went with her as he might have done with a man chum of his own age. And when she preferred to ride *without* Forsyth it did not occur to Elden that she preferred to ride *with* him.

They were soon in the country, and Edith, leading, swung from the road to a bridle trail that followed the winding of the river. As her graceful figure drifted on ahead it seemed more than ever reminiscent of Reenie Hardy. What rides they had had on those foothill trails! What dippings into the great canyons! What adventures into the spruce forests! And how long ago it all seemed. That was before he started on the paper; before he had been in the grocery business, or in the coal business; back in the long, long past on the ranch in the days before his father died. Life—how it goes! And had it brought to her as many changes as to him? And had it, perhaps, brought to her one change it had not brought to him—a change in the anchor about which her heart's affection clung? This girl, riding ahead, suggestive in every curve and pose of Reenie Hardy... His eyes were burning with loneliness.

He knew he was dull that day, and Edith was particularly charming and vivacious. She coaxed him into conversation a dozen times, but he answered absent-mindedly. At length she leapt from her horse and seated herself, facing the river, on a fallen log. Without looking back she indicated with her hand the space beside her, and Dave followed and sat down. For a time they watched the swift water in silence; blue-green where the current ran deeply; tinged with brown glow in the shallows from the gravel underneath.

"You aren't talking to-day," she said at length. "You don't quite do yourself justice. What's wrong?"



[Illustration: "You aren't talking to-day ... what's wrong?"]

"Oh, nothing," he answered with a laugh, pulling himself together. "This September weather always gets me. I guess I have a streak of Indian; it comes of being brought up on the ranges. And in September, after the first frosts have touched the foliage—" He paused, as though it was not necessary to say more.

"Yes, I know," she said quietly. Then, with a queer little note of confidence, "Don't apologize for it, Dave."

"Apologize?" and his form straightened. "Certainly not... One doesn't apologize for nature, does he? ... But it comes back in September." He smiled, and she thought the subconscious in him was calling up the smell of fire in dry grass, or perhaps even the rumble of buffalo over the hills. And he knew he smiled because he had so completely misled her.

Presently she took out a pocket volume. "Will you read?" she said. Strangely enough he opened it at the lines:

"Oh, you will never hide your soul from me;
I've seen the jewels flash, and know 'tis there
Muffle it as you will."

...It was dusk when they started homeward.

Forsyth was waiting for her. Dave scented stormy weather and excused himself early.

"What does this mean?" demanded Forsyth, angrily, as soon as Dave had gone. "Do you think I'll take second place to that—that coal heaver?"

She straightened, and her bright eyes were charged with a blaze which would have astonished Dave, who had known her only in her milder moods. But she tried to speak without passion.

"That is not to his discredit," she said.

"Straight from the corrals into good society," Forsyth sneered.

Then she made no pretense of composure. "If you have nothing more to urge against Mr. Elden, perhaps you will go."

Forsyth took his hat. At the door he paused and turned, but she was already ostensibly interested in a magazine. He went out into the night.

The week was a busy one with Dave, and he had no opportunity to visit the Duncans. Friday Edith called him on the telephone. She asked an inconsequential question about something which had appeared in the paper, and from that the talk drifted on until it turned on the point of their expedition of the previous Sunday. Dave never could account quite clearly how it happened, but when he hung up the receiver he knew he had asked her to ride with him again on Sunday, and she had accepted. He had ridden with her before, of course, but he had never *asked* her before. He had been a sort of honoured employee, whose business it was to comply with her wishes. But this time she would ride at his request. He felt that a subtle change had come over their relationship.

He was at the Duncan house earlier than usual Sunday afternoon, but not too early for Edith. She was dressed for the occasion; she seemed more fetching than he had ever seen her. There was the blush of health—or was it altogether the blush of health?—on her cheeks, and a light in her eyes such as he had seen more than once on those last rides with Reenie Hardy. And across her saddle she threw a brown sweater.

She led the way over the path followed the Sunday before until again they sat by the rushing water. Dave had again been filled with a sense of Reenie Hardy, and his conversation was disjointed and uninteresting. She tried unsuccessfully to draw him out with questions about himself; then took the more astute tack of speaking of her own past life. It had begun in an eastern city, ever so many years ago.

Chivalry could not allow that to pass. "Oh, not so very many," said Dave.

"How many?" she teased. "Guess."

He looked judicially on her bright face; it was a good face to look upon. Perhaps his eyes said as much.

"Nineteen," he hazarded.

"Oh, more than that."

"Twenty-one?"

"Oh, less than that." And their first confidence was established.

"Twenty," thought Dave to himself. "Reenie must be about twenty now."

"And I was five when—when Jack died," she went on. "Jack was my brother, you know. He was seven, and a great boy for his daddy. Most boys run to their mother with their hurts, but Jack was different. When father was at the office Jack would save up his little hurts until evening... Well, we were playing, and I stood on the car tracks, signalling the motorman, to make him ring his bell. On came the car, with the bell clanging, and the man in blue looking very cross. Jack

must have thought I was waiting too long, for he suddenly rushed on the track to pull me off." She stopped, and sat looking at the rushing water.

"I heard him cry, 'Oh Daddy, Daddy,' above the screech of the brakes," she continued, in a dry voice.

"Sorrow is a strange thing," she went on, after a pause. "I don't pretend to understand, but it seems to have its place in life. I fancy this would soon be a pretty degenerate world if there were no sorrow in it. I have been told that sometimes fruit trees refuse to bear until they have met with adversity. Then the gardener bores a hole in them, or something like that, and, behold, next season they bear. Sounds silly, but they say it's a fact. I guess it's natural law. Well—" She paused again, and when she spoke it was in a lower, more confidential note.

"I shouldn't tell you this, Dave. I shouldn't know it myself. But before that things hadn't been, well, just as good as they might in our home... They've been different since."

The shock of her words brought him upright. To him it seemed that Mr. and Mrs. Duncan were the ideal father and mother. It was impossible to associate them with a home where things "hadn't been just as good as they might." But her half confession left no room for remark.

"Mother told me," she went on, after a long silence, and without looking at him. "A few years ago, 'If some one had only told me, when I was your age,' she said."

"Why do you tell me this?" he suddenly demanded.

"Did you ever feel that you just had to tell *someone*?"

It was his turn to pause. "Yes," he confessed, at length.

"Then tell me."

So he led her down through the tragedy of his youth and the lonely rudderless course of his boyhood. She followed sympathetically to the day when Dr. Hardy and his daughter Irene became guests at the Elden ranch. And then her interest manifested something deeper than sympathy. But he had become engrossed in his narrative... The September day had drawn to a close, and the dusk was thick about them, ere he reached the end. But before the end he stopped. Should he tell her all? Why not? She had opened her life to him. So he told her of that last evening with Irene, and the compact under the trees and the moon. Her hand had fallen into his as they talked, but here he felt it slowly withdrawn. But he was fired with the flame of love which had sprung up in the breath of his reminiscence... And Edith was his friend and his chum.

"And you have been true?" she said, but her voice was distant and strained.

"Yes."

"And you are waiting for her?"

"Yes, I am waiting... It must be so." ...

"It is cold," she said. "Let us go home."

CHAPTER TEN

Whatever the effect of this conversation had been upon Edith she concealed it carefully, and Dave counted it one of the fortunate events of his life. It had sealed to him a new friendship, a confidence to support him in days of stress. He had been working under the spur of his passion for Irene, but now this was to be supplemented by the friendship of Edith. That it was more than friendship on her part did not occur to him at all, but he knew she was interested in him, and he was doubly determined that he would justify her interest and confidence. He threw himself into the columns of *The Call* with greater vigour than ever.

But just at this time another incident occurred which was to turn the flood of his life into strange channels. Dave had been promoted to the distinction of a private office—a little six-by-six "box stall," as the sports editor described it—but none the less a distinction shared only with the managing editor and Bert Morrison, compiler of the woman's page. Her name was Roberta, but she was masculine to the tips, and everybody called her Bert. The remainder of the staff occupied a big, dingy room, with walls pasted with specimen headings, comic cartoons, and racy pictures, and floor carpeted deeply with exchanges. Dave, however, had established some sort of order in his den, and had installed at his own cost a spring lock to prevent depredations upon his paste pot or sudden raids upon his select file of time copy.

Into this sanctuary one afternoon in October came Conward. It was such an afternoon as to

set every office-worker at war with the gods; the glories of the foothill October are known only in the foothill country, and Dave, married though he was to his work, felt the call of the sunshine and the open spaces. This was a time for fallen leaves and brown grass and splashes of colour everywhere—nature's autumn colours, bright, glorious, unsubdued. Only Dave knew how his blood leaped to that suggestion. But the world must go on.

Conward's habitual cigarette hung from its accustomed short tooth, and his round, florid face seemed puffier than usual. His aversion to any exercise more vigorous than offered by a billiard cue was beginning to reflect itself in a premature rotundity of figure. But his soft, sedulous voice had not lost the note of friendly confidence which had attracted Dave, perhaps against his better judgment, on the night of their first meeting.

"Lo, Dave," he said. "Alone?"

"Almost," said Dave, without looking up from his typewriter. Then, turning, he kicked the door shut with his heel and said, "Shoot."

"This strenuous life is spoiling your good manners, Dave, my boy," said Conward, lazily exhaling a thin cloud of smoke. "If work made a man rich you'd die a millionaire. But it isn't work that makes men rich. Ever think of that?"

"If a man does not become rich by work he has no right to become rich at all," Dave retorted.

"What do you mean by that word 'right,' Dave? Define it."

"Haven't time. We go to press at four."

"That's the trouble with fellows like you," Conward continued. "You haven't time. You stick too close to your jobs. You never see the better chances lying all around. Now suppose you let them go to press without you to-day, and you listen to me for a while."

Dave was about to throw him out when a gust of yearning for the open spaces swept over him again. It was true enough. He was giving his whole life to his paper. Promotion was slow, and there was no prospect of a really big position at any time. He remembered Mr. Duncan's remarks about newspaper training being the best preparation for something else. With a sudden decision he closed his desk. "Shoot," he said again, but this time with less impatience.

"That's better," said Conward. "Have you ever thought of the future of this town?"

"Well, I can't say that I have. I've been busy with its present."

"That's what I supposed. You've been too busy with the details of your little job to give attention to bigger things. Now, let me pass you a few pieces of information—things you must know, but you have never put them together before. What are the natural elements which make a country or city a desirable place to live? I'll tell you. Climate, transportation, good water, variety of landscape, opportunity of independence. Given these conditions, everything else can be added. Now, our climate—of course it is misunderstood in the South and East, but misunderstanding doesn't ruffle it. You and I know what it is. This is a white man's climate. Follow our latitude into Europe if you want to find the seats of power and success. London and Berlin are north of us; Paris very little south."

"Where did you get this stuff?" Dave interjected. "Sounds like the prelude of an address before a boomsters' club."

"I've been thinking, while you've been too busy to think," Conward retorted. "Then there's transportation. This is one of the few centres in America which has a north and south trade equal to its east and west trade. We're on the cross-roads. Every settler who goes into the North—and it is a mighty North—means more north and south trade. The development of the Pacific Coast, the industrialization of Asia, the opening of the Panama Canal—these mean east and west trade. Every railway that taps this country must come to this city, because we have the start, and are too big to be ignored."

"'City' is good," said Dave.

"All right. Scoff as much as you like. Have your joke before it turns on you. There'll be a quarter of a million people here before you're dead, if you play fair with the life insurance people."

"Go on."

"Then there's the soil—the richest soil in the world. Just dry enough to keep it from leaching. Natural possibilities for irrigation wherever necessary—"

"I'm not sure about it as a grain country," interrupted Dave, with a touch of antagonism.

"That is because you were brought up on a ranch, and are a rancher at heart," Conward shot back. "No rancher is ever sure of any country being a grain country. All he is sure of is that if the farmer comes it is good-bye to the open range. Just as the fur-trader blackguarded the climate to

keep the stockman out, so is the stockman blackguarding the climate to keep the farmer out. But they're coming. They can't be stopped. It's only a case of education—of advertising.

"I tell you, Dave, the movement is on now, and before long it'll hit us like a tidal wave. I've been a bit of a gambler all my life, but this is the biggest jack-pot ever was, and I'm going to sit in. How about you?"

"I'd like to think it over. Promotion doesn't come very fast on this job, that's sure."

"Yes, and while you are thinking it over chances are slipping by. Don't think it over—put it over. I tell you, Dave, there are big things in the air. They are beginning to move already. Have you noticed the strangers in town of late? That's the advance guard—"

"Advance guard of a real estate boom?"

"Hish! That's a bad word. Get away from it. Say 'Industrial development.'"

"All right,—industrial development. And do we have to have an advance guard of strangers to bring about 'industrial development?'"

"Sure. That's the only way. You never heard of the old-timers in a town booming it—the term goes between us—did you? Never. The old resident is always deader than the town, no matter how dead the town may be. And this business is a science. The right gang can spring it anywhere, and almost any time.

"Let me elaborate. We'll say Alkali Lake is a railway station where lots go begging at a hundred dollars each. In drops a well dressed stranger—buys ten lots at a hundred and fifty each—and the old-timers are chuckling over sticking him. But in drops another stranger and buys a block of lots at two hundred each. Then the old timers begin to wonder if they didn't sell too soon. By the time the fourth or fifth stranger has dropped in they are dead sure of it, and they are trying to buy their lots back. All sorts of rumours get started, nobody knows how. New railways are coming, big factories are to be started, minerals have been located, there's a secret war on between great monied interests. The town council meets and changes the name to Silver City—having regard, no doubt, to the alkali in the sleugh water. The old-timers, and all that great, innocent public which is forever hoping to get something for nothing, are now glad to buy the lots at five hundred to ten thousand dollars each, and by the time they've bought it up the gang moves on. It's the smoothest game in the world, and every community will fall for it at least twice... Well, they're here.

"Of course, it's a little different in this case, because there really is something in the way of natural advantages to support it. It's not all hot air. That'll make the event just so much bigger.

"Now, Dave, I've been dipping in a little already, and it struck me we might work together on this deal. Your paper has considerable weight, and if that weight falls the right way you won't find me stingy. For instance, an item that this property"—he produced a slip with some legal descriptions—"has been sold for ten thousand dollars to eastern investors—very conservative investors from the East, don't forget that—might help to turn another deal that's just hanging. Sorry to keep you so long, but perhaps you can catch the press yet." And, with one of his friendly mannerisms, Conward departed.

Dave sat for some minutes in a quandary. He was discouraged with his salary, or, rather, with the lack of prospect of any increase in his salary. Conward's words had been very unsettling. They pulled in opposite directions. They fired him with a new enthusiasm for his city, and they intimated that a gang of professional land-gamblers was soon to perpetrate an enormous theft, leaving the public holding the sack. Still there must be a middle course somewhere.

He walked to his little window and looked across the warm prairie. No buildings cut his view from the brown hillsides where the lazy mists of autumn beckoned to be out and free. It was a sleepy cow-town still, and yet, as he now recalled, a new pulse had been throbbing its arteries of late. The proportion of strangers—men in white collars and street shoes—at the hotels was steadily growing. Rents were going up. It was the first low wave—and Conward's ear had caught it...

At any rate, he could use Conward's story about the land sale. That was news—legitimate news. Of course, it might be a faked sale—faked for its news value—but reporters are not paid for being detectives. The rule was to publish the news while it was hot. Nothing is so perishable as news. It must be used at once or discarded altogether... The *Evening Call* carried a statement of Conward's sale, and on that statement was hung a column story on the growing prosperity of the city, and its assured future owing to its exceptional climate and natural resources, combined with its commanding position on transportation routes, both east and west and north and south. With the industrialization of Asia and the settlement of the great North—and how great is that North—etc., etc.

During the following days Dave had a keener eye than usual for evidences of 'industrial development.' He found them on every hand. Old properties, long considered unsalable, were changing owners. Handsomely furnished offices had been opened on principal corners for the sale of city and country property. Hotels were crowded, bar-rooms were jammed. The

preponderance of the male population had never been so pronounced, and every incoming train added to it. Money moved easily; wages were stiffening; tradesmen were in demand. There was material for many good stories in his investigations. He began writing features on the city's prosperity and prospects. The rival paper did the same, and there was soon started between them a competition of optimism. The great word became "boost." It stood, apparently, for any action or attitude that would increase prices. The virus was now in the veins of the community; pulsing through every street and by-way of the little city. Dave marvelled, and wondered how he had failed to read these signs until Conward had laid their portent bare before him. But as yet it was only his news sense that responded; his delight in the strange and the sensational. He was not yet inoculated with the poison of easy wealth.

His nights were busy with his investigations, but on Sundays, as usual, he went out to Duncans'. He had developed the habit of attending morning service; he loved the music, and it was customary for Edith to sing a morning solo. Her voice, which had enraptured him when they first met, had developed wonderfully. It filled the morning air like the clear tolling of silver bells. For its sake he gladly endured the sermons, and even in the sermon he sometimes found common ground with the preacher. They could meet on any faith that postulated the brotherhood of man. But the reverend speaker touched such a subject warily. It seemed to Dave he would gladly have gone further, but was held in restraint by a sense of the orthodoxy of his congregation. Too literal an interpretation of the brotherhood of man might carry the taint of Socialism, and the congregation represented the wealth of the city. It was safer to preach learnedly on abstractions of belief.

This morning Edith had not been in her place, and the service was flat. In the afternoon she was not at her home. Mrs. Duncan explained that Edith had gone to visit a girl friend in the country; would be away for some time. Dave felt a foolish annoyance that she should have left town. She might at least have called him up. Why should she call him up? Of course not. Still, the town was very empty. He drove with Mrs. Duncan in the afternoon, and at night took a long walk by the river. He had a vague but oppressive sense of loneliness. He had not realized what part of his life these Sunday afternoons with Edith had come to be. He had no man friends; his nature held him apart from his own sex. And yet he had a strange capacity for making friends quickly, if he tried. But he didn't try. He didn't feel the need. But he felt lost without Edith.

A few days later Conward strolled in, with the inevitable cigarette. He smoked in silence until Dave completed a story.

"Good stuff you're giving us," he commented, when the article was finished. "Mighty good stuff."

"Your tip put me on to a good lead all right," Dave acknowledged. "And now *The Times* is chasing me hard. They had a story this morning that the — railway is buying a right-of-way up the river."

"Remember what I told you the other day? Stories start from nowhere. It's just like putting a match to tinder. Now we're off."

Conward smoked a few minutes in silence, but Dave could not fail to see the excitement under his calm exterior. He had, as he said, decided to "sit in" in the biggest game ever played. The intoxication of sudden wealth had already fired his blood.

He slipped a bill to Dave. "For your services in that little transaction," he explained.

Elden held the bill in his fingers, gingerly, as though it might carry infection, as in very truth it did. He realized that he stood at a turning point—that everything the future held for him might rest on his present decision. There remained in him not a little of the fine, stern honour of the ranchmen of the open range; an honour curious, sometimes terrible, in its interpretation of right and wrong, but a fine, stern honour none the less. And he instinctively felt that to accept this money would compromise him forever more. And yet—others did it. He had no doubt of that. Conward would laugh at such scruples. And Conward had more friends than he had. Everybody liked Conward. It seemed to Dave that he, only, distrusted him. But that, also, as Dave said to himself, lay in the point of view. He granted that he had no more right to impose his standard of morals upon Conward than the preacher had to impose an arbitrary belief upon him. And as he turned the bill in his fingers he noticed that it was for one hundred dollars. He had thought it was ten.

"I can't take that much," he exclaimed. "It isn't fair."

"Fair enough," said Conward, well pleased that Dave should be impressed by his generosity. "Fair enough," he repeated. "It's just ten per cent. of my profit."

"You mean you made a thousand dollars on that deal?"

"Exactly that. And that will look like a peanut to what we are going to make later on."

"We?"

"Yes. You and me. We're going into partnership."

"But I've nothing to invest. I've only a very little saved up."

"Invest that hundred."

Dave looked at Conward sharply. Was he trifling? No; his eyes were frank and serious.

"You mean it?"

"Of course. Now, I'll put you on to something, and it's the biggest thing that has been pulled off yet. There's a section of land lying right against the city limits that is owned by a fellow over in England; remittance man who fell heir to an estate and had to go home to spend it. Well, he has been paying taxes ever since, and is tired of the 'bally rawnch'; besides, he is busy keeping his property in England reasonably well spent. I am arranging through a London office to offer him ten dollars an acre, and I'll bet he jumps at it. I've arranged for the necessary credits, but there will be some expenses for cables, etc., and you can put your hundred into that. If we pull it off—and we will pull it off—we start up in business as Conward & Elden, or Elden & Conward, which ever sounds better. Boy, there's a fortune in it."

"What do you figure it's worth?" said Dave, trying to speak easily. "Twenty-five dollars an acre?"

"Twenty-five dollars an acre!" Conward shouted. "Dave, newspaper routine has killed your imagination, little as one would expect such a result, from some of the things the papers print. Twenty-five dollars an acre! Listen!"

"The city boundaries are to be extended—probably will be by the time this deal goes through. Then it is city property. A street railway system is to be built, and we'll see that it runs through our land. We may have to 'grease' somebody, but it's a poor engineer that saves on grease. Then we'll survey that section into twenty-five foot lots—and we'll sell them at two hundred dollars each for those nearest the city down to one hundred for those farthest out—average one hundred and fifty, total nine hundred and sixty thousand dollars. Allow say sixty thousand for 'grease' and there is still nine hundred thousand, and that doesn't count re-sale commissions. Dave, it's good for a cool million. And that is just the beginning. It will give us a standing that will make anything possible."

Dave was doing rapid thinking. Suddenly he faced Conward, and their eyes met. "Conward," he said, "why do you put this up to me?"

"What d'ye mean?"

"You don't need my little hundred to put this over. Why do you let me in on it?"

Conward smiled and breathed easily. There had been a moment of tension.

"Oh, that's simple," he answered. "I figure this business is going to be too big for me, and you are the partner I need. I figure we'll travel well in double harness. I'm a good mixer—I know people—and I've got ideas. And you're sound and honourable and people trust you."

"Thanks," said Dave, dryly.

"That's right," Conward continued. "We'll be a combination hard to beat. You know the story about the brothers in the coal business?"

"No."

"Jim and Fred were coal dealers, when a revival broke out in their town, and Jim got religion. Then he tried to convert Fred; tried awful hard to get Fred to at least go to the meetings. But Fred wouldn't budge. Said it wasn't practicable. Jim argued and coaxed and prayed, but without result. At last he put it up to Fred.

"'Fred,' he said, 'why won't you come to our meetings?'"

"'Well,' the brother answered, 'it was all right for you to get religion. Sort o' lends respectability to the firm. But if I get it too, who's going to weigh the coal?'"

The two men laughed over the story, and yet it left an unpleasant impression upon Dave. He had never felt sure of Conward, and now he felt less sure than ever. But the lust of easy money was beginning to stir within him. The bill in his hands represented more than three weeks' wages. Conward was making money—making money fast, and surely here was an opportunity such as comes once in a lifetime. A boy shoved in his head and yelled for copy. Dave swore at him, impatiently. He had never before realized how irksome the drudgery of his steady grind had become.

"I'll go you," he said to Conward at last. "I'll risk this hundred, and a little more if necessary."

"Good," said Conward, springing to his feet and taking Dave's hand in a warm grasp. "Now we're away. But you better play safe. Stick to your pay cheque here until we pull the deal through. There won't be much to do until then, anyway, and you can help more by guiding the

paper along right lines."

"It sounds like a fairy tale," Dave demurred, as though unwilling to credit the possibilities Conward had outlined. "You're sure it can be done?"

"Done? Why, son, it has been done in all the big centres in the States, and at many a place that'll never be a centre at all. And it will be done here. Dave, bigger things than you dare to dream of are looming up right ahead."

Then Dave had a qualm. "If that section of land is worth close to a million dollars," he said, "is it quite fair to take advantage of the owner's absence and ignorance to buy it for a few thousand?"

"Dave," said Conward, with an arm on his shoulder, "the respectability of the firm is safe in your hands. But—*please* let me weigh the coal."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

David Elden smoked his after-dinner cigar in his bachelor quarters. The years had been good to the firm of Conward & Elden; good far beyond the wildness of their first dreams. The transaction of the section bought from the English absentee had been but the beginning of bigger and more daring adventures. That section was now considered close-in property, and lots which Conward & Elden had originally sold for two hundred dollars each had since changed hands at more than a thousand. The street railway ran far beyond it. Water mains, sewers, electric lights, graded streets and concrete sidewalks had sprawled for miles across the prairie. Conward, in that first wild prophecy of his, had spoken of a city of a quarter of a million people; already more lots had been sold than could be occupied by four times that population.

It had been a very marvellous development; an enthusiasm which had grown deeper and wilder until it swept along as an insane abandon, bearing in its current the last vestiges of conservatism and caution. For at last the old-timers, long alluded to as the "dead ones," had come in. For years they had held back, scoffing, predicting disaster; and while they held back venturesome youths had become millionaires. One can stand that only so long, and at last the old-timers were buying and selling and debauching with the others in the lust of easy money.

Dave had often asked himself where it all would end. He traced it from its beginning; from the day when he wrote his first "boost" story; from the hundred-dollar bill that Conward had placed in his hands. It was a simple course to trace; so simple now that he was amazed that only Conward and a few shrewd others had seen it at that time. It had begun with the prosperity of incoming money; the money of a little group of speculators and adventurers and the others who hung on their train. They had filled the few hotels and office buildings. Presently some one began to build a new hotel. Labour was scarce and dear; carpenters, masons, bricklayers, plumbers, plasterers, labourers, had to be brought in from the outside. There was no place for them to sleep; there was no place for them to eat; there were insufficient stores to supply their wants. More hotels and shops and stores and houses had to be built, and to build them more carpenters and masons and bricklayers and plumbers and plasterers and painters had to be brought from the outside. The thing grew upon itself. It was like a fire starting slowly in the still prairie grass, which by its own heat creates a breeze that in turn gives birth to a gale that whips it forth in uncontrollable fury. Houses went up, blocks of them, streets of them, miles of them, but they could not keep pace with the demand, for every builder of a house must have a roof to sleep under. And there were streets to build; streets to grade and fill and pave; ditches to dig and sidewalks to lay and wires to string. And more houses had to be built for the men who paved streets and dug ditches and laid sidewalks and strung wires. And more stores and more hotels and more churches and more schools and more places of amusement were needed. And the fire fed on its own fury and spread to lengths undreamed by those who first set the match to the dry grass.

The process of speculation was as easily defined. The first buyers were cautious; they looked over the vacant lots carefully; weighed their advantages and disadvantages; the prospect of the city growing this way or that. But scarcely had they bought when they sold again at a profit, and were seized with a quick regret that they had not bought more, or earlier. Soon the caution of the early transactions was forgotten in the rush for more lots which, almost immediately, could be re-sold at a profit. Judgment and discretion became handicaps in the race; the successful man was he who threw all such qualities to the winds. Fortunes were made; intrinsic values were lost sight of in the glare of great and sudden profits. Prices mounted up and up, and when calmer counsels held that they had reached their limits all such counsels were abashed by prices soaring higher still.

And the firm of Conward & Elden had profited not the least in these wild years of gain-getting. Their mahogany finished first floor quarters were the last word in office luxuriance.

Conward's private room might with credit have housed a premier or a president. Its purpose was to be impressive, rather than to give any other service, as Conward spent little of his time therein. On Dave fell the responsibility of office management, and his room was fitted for efficiency rather than luxury. It commanded a view of the long general office where a battery of stenographers and clerks took care of the detail of the business of Conward & Elden. And Dave had established his ability as an office manager. His fairness, his fearlessness, his impartiality, his courtesy, his even temper—save on rare and excusable occasions—had won from the staff a loyalty which Conward, with all his abilities as a good mixer, could never have commanded.

He had prospered, of course. His statement to his banker ran into seven figures. For years he had not known the experience of being short of money for any personal purpose. Occasionally, at first, and again of late, the firm had found it necessary to resort to high finance. This was usually accomplished by getting a bank so deeply involved in their speculations that, in moments of emergency, it dared not desert them if it would. There are ways of doing that. And always the daring of Conward and the organization of Elden had justified themselves. Dave was still a young man, not yet in his thirties; he was rated a millionaire; he had health, comeliness, and personality; he commanded the respect of a wide circle of business men, and was regarded as one of the matrimonial prizes of the city; his name had been discussed for public office; he was a success.

And yet this night, as he sat in his comfortable rooms and watched the street lights come fluttering on as twilight silhouetted the great hills to the west, he was not so sure of his success. A gas fire burned in the grate, rippling in blue, sinuous waves, and radiating an agreeable warmth on the May evening air. Dave finished his cigar and stood by the window, where the street light now poured in, blending its pale effulgence with the blue radiance from the grate. He was a man to be admired. His frame a trifle stouter than when we last saw him, but still supple and firm; the set of the shoulders, the taper of the body to the waist, the keen but passive face, the poise of the whole figure was that of one who, tasting of the goodness of life, had not gormandized thereon. He was called a success, yet in the honesty of his own soul he feared the coin did not ring true. Conward had insisted more and more upon "weighing the coal." And Dave had concerned himself less and less with the measure. That was what worried him. He felt that the crude but honest conception of the square deal which was the one valuable heritage of his childhood was slipping away from him. He had little in common with Conward outside of their business relationship. He suspected the man vaguely, but had never found tangible ground for his suspicion. Dave did not drink, and those confidences peculiar to a state of semi-intoxication were denied him. He was afraid to drink, not with the fear of the craven, but with the fear of a man who knows his enemy's advantage. He had suffered in his own home, and he feared the enemy, and would make no truce. Neither was he seduced by the vices which the possession of wealth made easy to his hand. He counted more as a dream—a sort of supernalism out of the past—that last night and that last compact with Irene Hardy, but it had been anchorage for his soul on more than one dangerous sea, and he would not give it up. Some time, he supposed, he should take a wife, but until then that covenant, sealed by the moonlight to the approving murmur of the spruce trees, should stand as his one title of character against which no *caveat* might be registered.

He was turning this very matter over in his mind, and wondering what the end would be, when a knock came at the door.

"Come," he said, switching on the light... "Oh, it's you, Bert. I am honoured. Sit down."

The girl threw her coat over a chair and sank into another. Without speaking she extended her shapely feet to the fire, but when its soothing warmth had comforted her limbs she looked up and said,

"Adam sure put it over on us, didn't he?"

"Still nursing that grievance over your sex," laughed Dave. "I thought you would outgrow it."

"I don't blame him," continued the girl, ignoring his interruption. "I am just getting back from forty-seven teas. Gabble, gabble, gabble. I don't blame him. We deserve it."

"Then you have had nothing to eat?"

"Almost. Only insignificant indigestibles."

Dave pressed a button, and a Chinese boy (all male Chinese are boys) entered, bowing in that deference which is so potent to separate the white man from his silver. The white man glories in being salaamed, especially by an Oriental, who can grovel with a touch of art. And the Oriental has not been slow to capitalize his master's vanity.

"Bring something to eat. Go out for it, and be quick. For two."

"Ice cream? Toast? Tea—"

"No! Something to eat! Soup, flied chicken, hot vegetables, dessert, everything."

"You've had your dinner, surely?" asked Bert.

"Such a dinner as a man eats alone," he answered. "Now for something real. You stick to the paper like the ink, don't you, Bert?"

"Can't leave it. I hate it—and I love it. It's my poison and my medicine. Most of all I hate the society twaddle. And, of course, that's what I have to do."

"And you write it up so gloriously," said Dave. "Enthusiasm in every line of it."

"You read it, then? I thought all men looked on the society page with contempt."

"They do. But they look on it just the same—long enough to see whether their names appear among those present."

"Or whose husband is out of town?"

"You're growing more cynical all the time."

"How can I help it, when I see both sides of the game? If I printed half what I know I'd have every lawyer in this city busy to-morrow—except those who skipped out over-night."

"You know it," Dave agreed. "But here is dinner." The boy wheeled a table between them, and there was a savoury smell of hot food.

"A *recherché* repast," screamed Bert, half through her soup, with a great burst of merriment. "Oh, I must tell you. You remember the Metfords? You used to shovel coal for them. I know you're no snob, or I wouldn't put it so brutally. Of course, they're rich. Sold the old stable-yard for a quarter of a million, or thereabouts, and are now living in style. Some style! When they have guests, as they nearly always have—there'll be parasites as long as there's easy money—old man Metford eats breakfast in evening dress. And she orders the chiffonier to take the guests down to the *depôt* in their Packer. But one thing has gone to her heart. She didn't realize in time that it wasn't good form to be prolific. Now that she knows three is the limit she has sent the other six to the country. But that isn't what I started on. She called up this morning and gave me hell because I said yesterday that she had served a *recherché* repast at some function they pulled off the other night. 'See here, young woman,' she says, 'I want you to understand there's none of that *recherché* stuff on my table. Nothing short of champagne, every drop of it.' I just yelled."

"Why didn't you print a retraction?"

"I don't know."

"I do. It's because, Miss Roberta, beneath your cynicism and your assumption of masculinity, you are as sympathetic as a young mother. It would be mean to put over anything like that, and you just can't do it."

"Nonsense. You see what I print at times—"

"Bert," he said suddenly, "why don't you get married?"

"Who, me?" Then she laughed. "I guess I'm too sympathetic. It would be mean to put over anything like that on a man, and a girl wouldn't have me."

"Well, then, why don't you buy some real estate?" he continued, jocularly. "Every man should have some dissipation—something to make him forget his other troubles."

"A little late in the meal for that word, isn't it?"

He stared a moment, and then sprang to his feet. "I beg your pardon. What will you drink?"

"What you drink."

"But I drink coffee."

"So do I... I may be mannish, Dave, but I don't think I'm a fool. I can understand a man drinking, but not a woman. It's too dangerous.... But I'll smoke a cigarette."

"Now, as for real estate. The fact is, I *have* invested."

A look came into his face which she did not understand. "With whom?" he demanded, almost peremptorily.

"With Conward & Elden," she answered, and the roguishness of her voice suggested that her despised femininity lay not far from the surface. "Were you about to be jealous?"

"Why didn't you come to me?" She realized that he was in deep earnest.

"I did," she answered, candidly. "At least, I asked for you, but you were out of town, so Conward took me in hand, and I followed his advice."

"Do you trust Conward?" he demanded almost fiercely.

"Well, he's good enough to be your partner, isn't he?"

The thrust hurt more than she knew. He had his poise again.

"Real estate is the only subject I would trust him on," she continued. "I must say, Dave, that for a shrewd business man you are awfully dense about Conward."

He remained silent for a few moments. He decided not to follow her lead. He knew that if she had anything explicit to say about Conward she would say it when she felt the time to be opportune, and not until then. He returned to the matter of her speculation.

"How much did you invest?"

"Not much. Just what I had."

"You mean all your savings?"

"Why not? It's all right, isn't it?"

He had risen and was standing again by the window. The long line of lights stretched out until they became mere diamond points on the velvet bosom of the night. Motor cars sped noiselessly to and fro, save where, at the corner below, chauffeurs exercised their sirens. But neither the lights, nor the night, nor the movement and noises of the street had any part in the young man's consciousness.

"It's all right, isn't it?" she repeated.

"I'm afraid it isn't," he said at length, in a restrained voice. "I'm afraid it isn't."

"What do you mean?" she demanded. There was an accusation in her eyes that was hard to face.

"Bert," he continued, "did it ever occur to you that this thing must have an end—that we can't go on forever lifting ourselves by our own bootstraps? We have built a city here, a great and beautiful city, almost as a wizard might build it by magic over night. There was room for it here; there was occasion; there was justification. But there was neither occasion nor justification for turning miles and miles of prairie land into city lots—lots which in the nature of things cannot possibly, in your time or mine, be required for city purposes. These lots should be producing; wheat, oats, potatoes, cows, butter—that is what we must build our city on. We have been considering the effect rather than the cause. The cause is the country, the neglected country, and until it overtakes the city we must stand still, if we do not go back. Our prosperity has been built on borrowed money, and we have forgotten that borrowed money must, sometime, be repaid. Meanwhile, in the heart of the greatest agricultural country in the world, we bring our potatoes across the American continent and our butter across the Pacific ocean."

He had spoken with effort, as one who makes a bitter confession, yet tries to state the case fairly, without excuses and without violence.

"You mean that the boom is about to burst?" she said.

"Not exactly burst. It will not be so sudden as that. It will just ooze away, like a toy balloon pricked with a pin."

There was silence for some minutes. When she spoke at length it was with a tinge of bitterness.

"So you are unloading?"

"The firm is. I beg you, Bert, to believe that if I had known your intention I would have tried to dissuade you. I would have advised you to keep your money in the bank until after the air cleared. Three per cent. is small, but it is better than tax bills on unsalable property."

"Why me particularly? I am only one of the great public. Why don't you give your conclusions to the world? When you were convinced that a period of inflation was about to occur you did not hesitate to say so. If I remember you used *The Call* for that purpose. Now that you see the reaction setting in, doesn't honesty suggest what your course should be?"

She had risen, and she, too, looked with unseeing eyes upon the busy street. There was reproach in her voice, Dave thought, rather than bitterness.

He spread his hands. "What's the use? The harm is done. To predict a collapse would be to precipitate a panic. It is as though we were passengers on a boat at sea. You and I know the boat is sinking, but the other passengers don't. They are making merry with champagne and motor cars—if you can accept that figure—and revelry and easy money. Why spoil their remaining few hours by telling them they are headed for the bottom?... Besides, they are not deserving of sympathy, after all. They are in the game because they wanted to make money without earning it. Gamblers, every one of them. And the man or woman who expects to get wealth without giving value shouldn't whine if, by a turn of fate, he gives value without getting wealth."

After a moment she placed her fingers on his arm. "Forgive me, Dave," she said. "I didn't mean to whine."

"You didn't whine," he returned, almost fiercely. "It's not in you. You are too good a sport. But there will be lots of whining in the coming months." Man-like it did not occur to Dave that in that moment the girl had bid good-bye to her savings of a dozen years, and had merely looked up and said, "Forgive me, Dave, I didn't mean to whine." When he thought of it, long afterward, he had a sudden conviction that if he had realized then just how much of a brick she was he would have proposed to her on the spot... And she would have laughed, and said, "Now, Dave, don't spoil our fun with anything like that."

What she did do was to let her hand creep up his arm until she could tap his cheek with her second finger. "Is this all the entertainment you can think of to-night?" she bantered.

He glanced at his watch. "It's late for a theatre," he said, "but we can ride. Which do you say—auto or horse-back?"

"I can't go horse-back in these clothes, and I don't want to change."

Dave pressed a button, and the omnipresent Chinese "boy" stood before him. "My car," he said. "The two-passenger car. I shall not want a driver." Then, continuing to Miss Morrison, "You will need something more than that coat. Let me see. My smoking jacket should fit."

In a few minutes they were threading their way through the street traffic in Dave's machine. Whatever had been his forecast of impending disaster, the streets held little hint of it. They were congested with traffic and building material. Although it was late at night the imperious clamour of electric riveters rattled down from steel structures on every hand. Office blocks, with their rental space all contracted months in advance, were being rushed to completion by the aid of arc lights and double shifts. But presently the traffic thinned, and the car hummed through long residential avenues of comfortable homes. From a thousand unmasked windows came the glow of light; here and there were the strains of music. On and on they sped, until the city streets and the city lights fell behind, and the car was swinging along a fine country road, through a land marked with streams and bridges, and blocked out with fragrant bluffs of young poplars.

At last, after an hour's steady driving in a delight of motion too keen for conversation, they pulled up on the brow of a hill. A soft breeze from the south-west, sensuous with the smell of spruce and balm-o'-gilead, pressed, cool and gentle, against their faces, and far to the south-east some settler's burning straw pile lay like an orange-red coal on the lips of the prairie, from which she blew an incense of ruddy gold and ochre, fan-shaped against the heavens. Behind them, to the north, far-away city lights danced and sparkled in the lap of the foot-hills, like diamonds strewn by some mighty and profligate Croesus. Dave switched off his lights, the better to appreciate the majesty of the night, and in the silence came the low murmur of water. There were no words. They sat and breathed it.

Suddenly, from a sharp bend in the road, flashed the lights of an approaching car. Dave was able to switch his own lights on again only in time to avoid a collision. The on-coming car lurched and passed by furiously, but not before Dave had recognized Conward as the driver. Back on its trail of dust floated the ribald notes of half-intoxicated women.

"Close enough," said Dave, when the dust had settled. "Well, let us jog back home."

They took the return trip leisurely, drinking in the glories of the night, and allowing time for the play of conversation. Bert Morrison was a good conversationalist. Her points of interest were almost infinite. And they were back among the street lights before they knew.

"Oh, we are nearly home," she exclaimed. "And, honest, Dave, I wanted to ask you something. Why don't you get married?"

"I guess I'm too sympathetic," he answered, after a moment's pause. "And it wouldn't be fair—"

"Oh, can that. It's been warmed over once already. Really, though, why don't you?"

"Why should I?"

"Why shouldn't you? It's natural. And you know you can't go on always just putting it off. It leaves your life empty. To-night, when I asked you if you had had dinner, you said, 'Such a meal as a man eats alone.' That betrays the emptiness."

"I suppose it does. But I don't know many girls. I don't know any girl very well, except you, and you wouldn't have me."

"No, I wouldn't," she answered frankly. "I like you too well. But you know other girls, and you could get to know more if you wanted to. There's Edith Duncan, for instance."

"Edith is a fine girl. The Duncans are wonderful people. I owe to them almost everything. But as for marrying Edith—"

"Why not?"

"I don't know. I never thought of it that way. She's a fine girl."

"None better," said Bert, with decision. "Dave, I'm not much on orthodox religion, as you know, but that girl's got something on me. She has a voice that would make her famous on the stage, but she uses it all the time, as she says, 'in the service of the King!' I think she's narrow on that point, but I know she's sincere. Edith has had a great sorrow, and it makes her nobility stand out, pure and wonderful, like a white gem in a black setting. It seems to be the law that one must rub shoulders with sorrow before he really begins to live. And any afternoon you can find her down in the children's ward, singing with that wonderful voice to the little sick sufferers."

"I know about her sorrow," said Dave, as though confessing a profound secret. "She told me about her little brother being killed."

It sprang to Bert's lips to say, "Oh, what's the use?" but she checked herself. They were at the door of her boarding-house. As he helped her to the sidewalk Dave stood for a moment with her hand in his. He had long liked Bert Morrison, and to-night he was powerfully drawn toward her. He knew—what she would have most strenuously denied—that her masculinity was a sham. Her defiance of convention—rambling like a fellow bachelor into his apartments—her occasional profanity and occasional cigarette—these were but the cloak from which her own deep womanhood was forever peering forth. He felt impelled to kiss her. He wondered if she would be angry; if such a familiarity would obstruct their growing friendship. He felt sure she would not be angry, but she would probably think him foolish. And man cannot endure being thought foolish by woman.

"Oh, I almost forgot," she said as they parted, as though she really had forgotten. "I was at a reception to-day when a beautiful woman asked for you. Asked me if I had ever heard of Mr. David Elden."

"What, Dave Elden, the millionaire?" I said. "Everybody knows him. He's the beau of the town, or could be, if he wanted to." Oh, I gave you a good name, Dave."

"Thanks, Bert. That was decent. Who was she?"

"She said her name was Irene Hardy."

CHAPTER TWELVE

Upon the return of Irene Hardy to the East it had slowly become apparent to her mother that things were not as they once had been. There were various vague stirrings of uneasiness, but perhaps the most alarming manifestation was the strange silence in which the girl enveloped herself. It seemed as though she had left part of her nature behind—had outgrown it, perhaps—and had created about herself an atmosphere of reserve foreign to her earlier life. It seemed as though the loneliness of the great plains had settled upon her. The old virility had been sobered; the gaiety of her girlhood had ripened into a poise more disturbing to Mrs. Hardy than any conventional excess could have been. She sought her own company; she tolerated social engagements in which she had previously found delight. And, most sinister of all, she showed no disposition to encourage the attentions which were ready enough in the offering.

"Whatever has come over Irene?" said Mrs. Hardy to the doctor one evening when their daughter had been particularly indifferent to a theatre invitation. "She hasn't been the same since she came home. I should not have let her go west alone."

The doctor looked up mildly from his paper. It was the custom of the doctor to look up mildly when Mrs. Hardy made a statement demanding some form of recognition. From the wide initiation into domestic affairs which his profession had given him, Dr. Hardy had long since ceased to look for the absolute in woman. He had never looked for it in man. He realized that in Mrs. Hardy he did not possess a perfect mate, but he was equally convinced that in no other woman would he have found a perfect mate, and he accepted his lot with the philosophy of his sixty years. If Mrs. Hardy, in some respects, failed to measure up to his standard of the ideal, he found it true nevertheless that she had many admirable qualities. Granting that in his matrimonial adventure he might possibly have done somewhat better, fairness compelled the admission that he might also have done very much worse. And being, as has been hinted, something of a philosopher, he had sought, whenever possible, to harmonize his life with hers; and when that was impossible, at least to keep what pressure he might upon the soft pedal. So instead of reminding his wife that Irene had not been alone when she went west he remarked, very mildly, that the girl was growing older.

Mrs. Hardy found in this remark occasion to lay down the book she had been holding, and to sit upright in a rigidity of intense disapproval. Dr. Hardy was aware that this was entirely a

theatrical attitude, assumed for the purpose of imposing upon him a proper humility. He had experienced it many, many times. And he knew that his statement, notwithstanding its obviousness, was about to be challenged.

"Dr. Hardy," said his wife, after the lapse of an appropriate period, "do you consider that an intelligent remark?"

"It has the advantage of truthfulness," returned the doctor, complacently. "It is susceptible of demonstration."

"I should think this is a matter of sufficient interest to the family to be discussed seriously," retorted Mrs. Hardy, who had an unfortunate habit of becoming exasperated by her husband's good humour. She had none of his philosophy, and she mistook his even temper for indifference. "Irene is our only child, and before your very eyes you see her—you see her—" Mrs. Hardy's fears were too nebulous to enable her to complete the sentence.

"Yes, I see her," the doctor admitted. "That is, I did see her at dinner. There is nothing alarming about that." Then, relenting, "But, seriously, what reason have you for uneasiness about the child?"

"Reason enough. She behaves so strangely. Do you know, I begin—I really do begin to suspect that she's in love."

It was Dr. Hardy's turn to sit upright. "Nonsense," he said. "Why should she be in love?" It is the unfortunate limitation of the philosopher that he so often leaves irrational behaviour out of the reckoning. "She is only a child."

"She will be eighteen presently. And why shouldn't she be in love? And the question is—who? That is for you to answer. Whom did she meet?"

"If you would find a Hamlet at the root of this melancholy you must ask our Ophelia. She met no one with me. My accident left me to enjoy my holiday as best I could at a ranch deep in the foothills, and Reenie stayed with me there. There was no one else—"

"No one? No ranch men, cowboys,—cow punchers—I think I have heard,"—with nice disdain.

"No. Only young Elden—"

"*Only?* Who is this young Elden?"

"But he is just a boy. Just the son of the old rancher of whom I have told you."

"Exactly. And Irene is just a girl. Dr. Hardy, you are all very well with your fevers and your chills, but you can't diagnose a love case worth a cent. An epidemic would break out under your very eyes and you blissfully unconscious. What about this young Elden? Did Irene see much of him?"

The doctor spread his hands. "Do you realize that there were four of us at that ranch—four, only, and no one else for miles? How could she help seeing him?",

"And you permitted it?"

"I was on my back with a broken leg. We were guests at their home. They were good Samaritans to us. I couldn't chaperon her. And besides, they don't do things that way in that country. You don't understand. It's altogether different."

"Andrew," said Mrs. Hardy, leaning forward, and the word was ominous, for she used his Christian name only in moments of crisis,—"was Irene ever, with this young man—alone?"

The doctor arose to his feet and trod heavily upon the rich carpetings. "I told you you don't understand," he protested. "The West is not the East. Everything is different—"

"I suppose human nature is different," she interrupted, meaningly. Then her head fell upon the table and her hands went up about her hair. It had been brown hair once, but was now thin and streaked with grey. "Oh, Andrew," she wept. "We are ruined. That we should ever have come to this!"

It was now Dr. Hardy's turn to be exasperated. There was one thing his philosophy could not endure. That was a person who was not, and would not be, philosophical. Mrs. Hardy was not, and would not be, philosophical. She was an absolutist. With Mrs. Hardy things were right or things were wrong. Moreover, that which was done according to rule was right, and that which was not done according to rule was wrong. It was apparent that the acquaintanceship of Irene and Dave Elden had not been according to rule.

"This is all nonsense," said the doctor, impatiently. "There is nothing to it, anyway. The girl had to have some company. What if they did ride together? What—"

"They rode together? Alone?"

"They had their horses along," said the doctor, whose impatience had made way for sarcasm.

"Through the forest, I suppose," said Mrs. Hardy, with an air of one whose humiliation is complete.

"Oh, yes, through the forests, across the foothills, up the canyons, hours of it, days of it, weeks of it—"

"Stop! You are mocking me. In this hour of shame you are making jests. Call Irene."

The girl was summoned. Her fine face had lost some of its brownness, and the eyes seemed deeper and slower, but she was still a vision of grace and beauty as she stood in response to their call framed in the curtains of an archway. Her quick sense caught the tense atmosphere, and she came forward with parted lips and extended fingers. There was the glint of light on her white teeth. "Yes?" she said. "What is wrong? Can I help?"

"Your father has confessed," said Mrs. Hardy, trying hard to speak with judicial calm. "Now tell us about your relations with this young Elden, this cow *puncher*. Let us know the worst."

Irene's startled eyes flew from her mother to her father's face. And there they caught something that restored their calm.

"There was no worst," she said, with a ripple of laughter. "But there was a good deal of best. Shall I tell you the best?"

"Irene," said her mother, severely, "Did you permit that young man to make love to you?"

"I did not give him permission, if that answers you, because—he didn't ask it."

Mrs. Hardy had risen, "Andrew, you hear that? She confesses. And you, blind, blind, couldn't see it!"

"Is it very dreadful?" asked Irene.

"Yes, you mock me, too. Of course it's dreadful. Horrible. What will everybody say?"

"No worse than you have said, I'll be bound," put in the doctor.

"Yes, take her part. What care you for the family name?"

"I have a right to speak for the family name," said the doctor firmly. "It was mine before it was yours. And I sometimes think, if we lived under more liberal laws, it might be mine after it had ceased to be yours.... I cannot see that the family name has been compromised in the slightest degree. This is Irene's first adventure. It will pass away. And even if it does not—he is a manly boy."

Mrs. Hardy surveyed her husband hopelessly, then turned to Irene. "Have you made any promises?"

"Only that I wouldn't make any promises until he had his chance. That seemed fair."

"I suppose you are receiving letters from him?"

"No."

"None at all?"

"None at all."

"Why doesn't he write?"

For the first time Irene's eyes fell, and the colour mounted richer in her cheeks. She had to confess now, not for herself, but for him.

"He can't write," she said.

"Merciful Heavens!" exclaimed Mrs. Hardy, collapsing into a chair. "Andrew, bring me a stimulant."

The outcome was that Mrs. Hardy insisted upon Irene embarking at once upon a finishing course. When this was completed, as the girl had shown a sense for form and colour, she encouraged her into a special art course. Afterwards they travelled together for a year in Europe. Then, home again, Irene pursued her art, and her mother surrounded her with the social attractions which Dr. Hardy's comfortable income and professional standing made possible. Her purpose was obvious, and but thinly disguised. She hoped that her daughter would outlive her youthful infatuation, and would at length, in a more suitable match, give her heart to one of the numerous eligibles of her circle.

To promote this end Mrs. Hardy spared no pains. Young Carlton, son of a banker, and one of

the leading men of his set, seemed a particularly appropriate match. Mrs. Hardy opened her home to him, and Carlton, whatever his motives, was not slow to grasp the situation. For years Irene had not spoken of Dave Elden, and the mother had grown to hope that the old attachment had died down and would presently be quite forgotten in a new and more becoming passion. The fact is that Irene at that time would have been quite incapable of stating her relation toward Elden and its influence upon her attitude to life. She was by no means sure that she loved that sun-burned boy of romantic memory; she was by no means sure that she should ever marry him, let his development in life be what it would. But she felt that her heart was locked, at least for the present, to all other suitors. She had given her promise, and that settled the matter. True, he had not come to claim fulfilment of that promise—and at times she scolded him soundly in the secrecy of her own mind for his negligence through all these years—but she was young, with no desire for a decisive step, and while she chafed under his apparent neglect she felt a sort of tingling dread of the day when he should neglect her no longer. One thing she knew; he had implanted in her soul a fine contempt for men of the set which Carlton typified. They would have thought Dave ignorant; but she knew that if Dave and Carlton were thrown into the wilderness on their own resources Dave would thrive and Carlton would starve. Perhaps Dave's education, although not recognized by any university save the university of hard knocks, was the more real and valuable of the two.

Notwithstanding her contempt for him, the girl found herself encouraging Carlton's advances, or at least not meeting them with the rebuffs which had been her habit toward all other suitors, and Mrs. Hardy's hopes grew as the attachment apparently developed. But they were soon to be shattered.

Irene had gone with Carlton to the theatre; afterwards to supper. It was long past midnight when she reached home; she knocked at her mother's door and immediately entered. She was splendidly gowned, but her hair was dishevelled and her cheeks were flushed, and she walked unsteadily across the room.

"What's the matter, Irene? What's the matter, child? Are you sick?" cried her mother, springing from her bed. "Oh, dear me, and the doctor is out!"

"No, I'm not sick," said the girl, brutally. "I'm drunk!"

"Oh, don't say that," said her mother, soothingly. "Proper people do not become drunk. You may have had too much champagne, and to-morrow you will have a headache—"

"Mother! I have had too much champagne, but not as much as that precious Carlton of yours had planned for. I just wanted to see how despicable he was, and I floated down stream with him as far as I dared. But just as the current got too swift I struck for shore. Oh, we made a scene, all right, but nobody knew me there, so the family name is safe and you can rest in peace. I called a taxi and when he tried to follow me in I slapped him and kicked him. Kicked him, mother. Dreadfully undignified, wasn't it?... And that's what you want me to marry, in place of a man!"

Mrs. Hardy was chattering with mortification and excitement. Her plans had miscarried. Irene had misbehaved. Irene was a difficult, headstrong child. It was useless to argue with her in her present mood. It was useless to argue with her in any mood. No doubt Carlton had been impetuous. Nevertheless, he stood high in his set, and his father was something of a power in the financial world. As the wife of such a man Irene might have a career before her—a career from which at least some of the glory would reflect upon the silvering head of the mother of Mrs. Carlton. And now Irene, by her folly and her ungovernable temper, had spoiled all the carefully laid plans. Mrs. Hardy was a very badly used woman.

"Go to your room," she said, at length. "You are in no condition to talk to-night. I must say it is a shame that you can't go out for an evening without drinking too much and making a scene.... In a public place, too.... What will Mr. Carlton think of you?"

"If he remembers all I told him about himself he'll have enough to think of," the girl blazed back. "You know—what I have told you—and still *Mister* Carlton stands as high in your sight as ever. *I* am the one to blame. Very well. I've tried your choice, and I've tried my own. Now I am in a position to judge. There will be nothing to talk about in the morning. Mention Carlton's name to me again and I will give the whole incident to the papers. With photographs. And names. Fancy the feature heading, 'Society girl, intoxicated, kicks escort out of taxi.' Good night."

But other matters were to demand the attention of mother and daughter in the morning. While the scene was occurring in Mrs. Hardy's bed-room her husband, clad in white, toiled in the operating room to save the life of a fellow being. It was an emergency operation, performed by artificial light, and without adequate assistance. There was a slip of an instrument, but the surgeon toiled on; he could not, at that juncture, pause; the life of the patient was at stake. When the operation was finished he found his injury deeper than he supposed, and Irene was summoned from her heavy sleep that morning to attend his bedside. He talked to her as a philosopher; said his life's work was done, and he was just as glad to go in the harness; the estate should yield something, and there was his life insurance—a third would be for her. And when Mrs. Hardy was not at his side he found opportunity to whisper, "And if you really love that boy out west, *marry him.*"

The sudden bereavement wrought a reconciliation between Mrs. Hardy and her daughter. Mrs. Hardy took her loss very much to heart. While Irene grieved for her father, Mrs. Hardy grieved for herself. It was awful to be left alone like this. There was something in her demeanour that suggested that Andrew had been rather unkind in departing as he did. And when the lawyers found that instead of a hundred thousand dollars the estate would yield a bare third of that sum she spoke openly of her husband's improvidence. He had enjoyed a handsome income, upon which his family had lived in luxury. That it was unequal to the strain of providing for them in that fashion and at the same time accumulating a reserve for such an eventuality as had occurred was a matter which his wife could scarcely overlook.

About this time it came to the notice of Mrs. Hardy that when the late Mr. Deware had departed this life Mrs. Deware, with her two daughters, had gone on a trip to England to dull the poignancy of their bereavement. The Dewares moved in the best circles, Mr. Deware having amassed a considerable fortune in the brewing business. It was obvious that whatever Mrs. Deware might do under such circumstances would be correct. Upon arrival at this conclusion Mrs. Hardy lost no time in buying two tickets for London.

Her health, however, had suffered a severe shock, for beneath her ostentation she felt as deep a regard for her late husband as was possible in one who measured everything in life by various social formulae. On the ocean voyage she contracted a cough, which the fogs of London did little to dispel, and February found her again on the Atlantic, with her mind occupied by more personal affairs than a seat at the captain's table. The voyage was a particularly unhappy one, and the widow's first concern upon reaching home was to consult a specialist who had enjoyed a close professional acquaintanceship with Dr. Hardy. The specialist gave her a careful, meditative, and solemn examination.

"Your condition is serious," he told her, "but not alarming. You must have a drier climate, and, preferably, a higher altitude. Fortunately, your heart is good, or I should have to keep you at sea level; that is, I should have had to sacrifice your lungs for your heart." The doctor spoke as though the sacrifice would have been all his, after the manner of a specialist. "As it is, I am convinced that the conditions your health demands are to be found in..." He named the former cow-town from which Irene's fateful automobile journey had had its start, and the young woman, who was present with her mother, felt herself go suddenly pale with the thought of a great prospect.

"Oh, I could never live there," Mrs. Hardy protested. "It is so crude. Cow *punchers*, you know, and all that sort of thing."

The specialist smiled. "You will probably not find it so crude, although I daresay some of its customs may jar on you," he remarked, dryly. "Still, I would recommend you to take your best gowns along. And it is not a case of not being able to live there. It is a case of not being able to live here. If you take my advice you should die of old age, so far, at least, as your present ailment is concerned. If you don't"—and he dropped his voice to just the correct note of gravity, which pleased Mrs. Hardy very much—"if you don't, I can't promise you a year."

Confronted with such an alternative, the good lady had no option but to suppress her repugnance toward cow punchers. Irene had expected opposition born of a more subtle reason, but it soon became evident that so deeply was her mother concerned with her own affairs that she had quite failed to associate the proposed change with any possibility of a re-opening of Irene's affair with the young rancher. It was years since they had discussed him, and the probability was that, although the incident remained in the back of Mrs. Hardy's memory, even his name had been forgotten.

Arrangements for the journey were made with the despatch which characterized Mrs. Hardy. She was a stickler for precedent; any departure from the beaten paths was in her decalogue the unpardonable sin, but when she had arrived at a decision she was no trifler. She accepted the situation with the resignation which she deemed to be correct under such circumstances, but the boundless prairies were to her so much desolation and ugliness. It was apparent that dwellers in the little four-cornered houses of the plains must be sadly lacking in any sense of the artistic, and as Mrs. Hardy gazed from the car window she acquired a habit of making with her tongue a sound which, owing to the limitations of the alphabet, cannot be represented to the reader, but which Irene understood to be an expression of mingled surprise, pity, and contempt. Irene gathered that her mother did not approve of prairies. They were something new to her life, and it was greatly to be suspected that they were improper.

With very different emotions did the girl find herself speeding again toward the scene of the first great event of her conscious life. For her the boundlessness, the vastness, the immeasurable sweep of the eye, suggested an environment out of which should grow a manhood and womanhood that should weigh mightily in the scales of destiny of a great nation; a manhood and womanhood defiant of the things that are, eager for the adventure of life untrammelled by traditions. She had a mental vision of the type which such a land must produce; her mind ran to riots of daring as it fashioned a picture which should fairly symbolize this people.... The day was drawing to a close, and a prairie sunset glowed upon them in a flush of colouring that stirred her artist soul. A cloudless sky, transparent as an ocean of glass; fathomless, infinite, save when in the west inverted islands of gold and brass and ruddy copper floated in a sea that gently deepened from saffron to opal; and under that sky the yellow prairies; ever, forever, and ever....

Up from the East came the night, and large, bright stars stood out, and the click-clack of the car wheels came louder and louder, and mimic car lamps raced along against the darkness outside. And then the settlers' lights began to blink across the prairie, and Irene's eyes were wet with an emotion she could not define; but she knew her painting had missed something; it had been all outline and no soul, and the prairies in the night are all soul and no outline; all softness and vagueness and yearning unutterable....

"How tiresome it is," said her mother. "Ask the porter to make up the berths."

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Mrs. Hardy accepted the surroundings she found in the city that was to be her home with not a little incredulity. For some days she treated the city as a deep rascal which had disguised its true nature in order to deceive her. She smiled at the ease with which she saw through all disguises. One of these days the cloak of respectability would be thrown off, and the shouting and shooting of the cow punchers would proclaim the West as it really was.

Very slowly it dawned upon Mrs. Hardy that this respectable, thriving city, with its well dressed, properly mannered people, its public spirit, its aggressiveness, its churches and theatres and schools, its law and order—and its afternoon teas ("My dear, who would have thought it possible?" She half expected a cowboy to ride in and overthrow the china)—very slowly it dawned upon her that this, after all, was the real West; sincere, earnest; crude, perhaps; bare, certainly; the scars of its recent battle with the wilderness still fresh upon its person; lacking the finish that only time can give to a landscape or a civilization; but lacking also the mouldiness, the mustiness, the insufferable artificiality of older communities. And the atmosphere! Day after day brought its cloudless sky, the weather, for once, having failed to observe the rule of contraries; evening after evening flooded valley and hilltop with its deluge of golden glory; night after night a crisp temperature sent her reaching for comforters. Sleep? She felt that she had never slept before. Eat? Her appetite was insatiable; all day long she lived in a semi-intoxication born of an unaccustomed altitude. And, best of all, something had happened to her cough; she did not know just what or when, but presently she discovered it was gone. Even Mrs. Hardy, steeped for sixty years in a life of precedent and rule and caste, began to catch the enthusiasm of a new land where precedent and rule and caste are something of a handicap.

"We must buy a home," she said to Irene. "We cannot afford to continue living at an hotel, and we must have our own home. You must look up a responsible dealer whose advice we can trust in a matter of this kind."

And was it remarkable that Irene Hardy should think at once of the firm of Conward & Elden? It was not. She had, indeed, been thinking of a member of that firm ever since the decision to move to the West. She had felt a peculiar hesitation about enquiring openly for Dave Elden, but, upon meeting a newspaper woman in the person of Miss Morrison she had voiced the great question with an apparent unconcern which did not in the slightest mislead the acute Roberta. It is the business of newspaper people to know things and people, and it seemed to Irene that she could ask such a question of Miss Morrison in a sort of professional way. But she had not been prepared for the reply.

The fact is Irene had not been at all sure that she wanted to marry Dave Elden. She wanted very much to meet him again; she was curious to know how the years had fared with him, and her curiosity was not unmixed with a finer sentiment; but she was not at all sure that she should marry him. She had tried to picture him in the eye of her imagination; she was sure he had acquired a modest education; he had probably been reasonably successful in business, either as an employee, or, in a small way, on his own account. She was moderately sure of all this; but there were pessimistic moods in which she saw him slipping back into the indifference of his old life soon after the inspiration of her presence had been withdrawn; perhaps still living with his bibulous father on the ranch in the foothills, or perhaps following the profession of cow puncher, held in such contempt by her mother. And in such moods she was sorry, but she knew she could never, never marry him.

"What, Dave Elden, the millionaire?" Bert Morrison had said. "Everybody knows him." And then the newspaper woman had gone on to tell what a figure Dave was in the business life of the city, and to declare that he might be equally prominent in the social life, did his fancies lead him in that direction. "One of our biggest young men," Bert Morrison had said. "Reserved, a little; likes his own company best; but absolutely white."

That gave a new turn to the situation. Irene had always wanted Dave to be a success; suddenly she doubted whether she had wanted him to be so big a success. And with that doubt came another and more disturbing one, which, if it had ever before crossed her mind, had found no harbourage there. She had doubted whether she should wish to marry Dave; she had never allowed herself to doubt that Dave would wish to marry her. Secretly, she had expected to rather

dazzle him with her ten years' development—with the culture and knowledge which study and travel and life had added to the charm of her young girlhood; and suddenly she realized that her lustre would shine but dimly in the greater glory of his own.... She became conscious of a very great desire to renew with Dave the intimacy of her girlhood.

It was easy to locate the office of Conward & Elden; it stood on a principal corner of a principal street, and the name was blazoned to the wayfarer in great gilt letters. Thence she led her mother, and found herself treading on the marble floors of the richly appointed waiting room in a secret excitement which she could with difficulty conceal. She was, indeed, very uncertain about the next development.... Her mother had to be reckoned with.

A young man asked courteously what could be done for them. "We want to see the head of the firm," said Mrs. Hardy. "We want to buy a house." It occurred to Irene that in some respects her mother was extremely artless, but the issue was for the moment postponed.

They were shown into Conward's office. Time had been when they would have seen no further than a head salesman; but times were changing, and real estate dealers were losing the hauteur of the days of their great success. Conward gave them the welcome of a man who expects to make money out of his visitors. He placed a very comfortable chair for Mrs. Hardy; he adjusted the blinds to a nicety; he discarded his cigarette and beamed upon them with as great a show of cordiality as his somewhat beefy appearance would permit. The years had not been over kind to Conward's person. His natural tendency to corpulence had been abetted by excessive eating; his face was red and flabby, his lips had no more colour than his face; and nature, in deciding to deprive him of a portion of his hair, had very unkindly elected to take it in patches, giving his head a sort of pinto effect. These imperfections were quickly appraised by Irene, but his manner appealed to Mrs. Hardy, who outlined her life history with considerable detail, dwelling more than once upon the perfections of the late Dr. Hardy—which perfections she now showed a disposition to magnify, as implying a certain distinction unto herself—and ended with the confession that the West was not as bad as she had feared, and anyway it was a case of living here or dying elsewhere, so she would have to make the best of it. And here they were. And might they see a house?

Conward appeared to be reflecting. As a matter of fact, he saw in this inexperienced buyer an opportunity to reduce his holdings in anticipation of the impending crash. His difficulty was that he had no key to the financial resources of his visitors. They had lived in good circumstances; they were the family of a successful professional man, but, as Conward well knew, many successful professional men had a manner of living that galloped hard on the heels of their income. The only thing was to throw out a feeler.

"You are wanting a nice home, I take it, that can be bought at a favourable price for cash. You would consider an investment of say—."

He paused, and Mrs. Hardy supplied the information for which he was waiting. "About twenty-five thousand dollars," she said.

"We can hardly invest that much," Irene interrupted, in a whisper. "We must have something to live on."

"People here live on the profits of their investments, do they not, Mr. Conward?" Mrs. Hardy inquired. "I have been told that that is the way they live, and they seem to live very well indeed."

"Oh, certainly," Conward agreed, and he plunged into a mass of incidents to show how profitable investments had been to other clients of the firm. He emphasized particularly the desirability of buying improved property—preferably residential property—and suddenly recalled that he had something very choice in which they might be interested. At this juncture Conward's mood of deliberation gave way to one of briskness; he summoned a car, and in a few minutes his clients were looking over the property which he had recommended. Mrs. Hardy, who, during her husband's lifetime had never found it necessary to bear financial responsibilities or make business decisions, was an amateurish buyer, her tendency being alternately to excess of caution on one side and recklessness on the other. Conward's manner pleased her; the house he showed pleased her, and she was eager to have it over with. But he was too shrewd to appear to encourage a hasty decision. He realized at once that he had sold Mrs. Hardy, but Irene was a customer calling for more tactful handling. Conward's eye had not failed to appraise the charm of the young woman's appearance. He would gladly have ingratiated himself with her, but he was conscious of a force in her personality that held him aloof. And that consciousness made him desire the more to gain her confidence.... However, this was a business transaction. He did not seize upon Mrs. Hardy's remark that the house seemed perfectly satisfactory; on the contrary, he insisted on showing other houses, which he quoted at such impossible figures that presently the old lady was in a feverish haste to make a deposit lest some other buyer should forestall her.

Back in Conward's office, while the agreement was being drawn, Irene was possessed of a consuming desire to consult with Dave Elden. She was uneasy about this transaction in which her mother proposed so precipitately to invest the greater part of their little fortune. But the more she thought over the situation the more its difficulties became apparent. She had no personal knowledge or experience which could be summoned for such an occasion. She would like to have asked Dave's advice; instinctively she distrusted Conward. Yet, ... Conward was Dave's partner. It

was impossible to attribute honest motives to one half of the firm and deny them to the other. And it was unreasonable to expect that Dave's advice would conflict with Conward's. And, in the event that an issue did arise between the two partners, it was quite certain that her mother would side with Conward. Meanwhile the agreement neared completion, and Mrs. Hardy had produced her cheque book.

Irene's excitement at length reached the point where she could no longer remain silent. "I think I would hesitate, mother," she cried. "If you buy this house we will have only a few thousand dollars left. I am not thinking of myself. Your health may demand other expenditures —"

"My health was never better," Mrs. Hardy interrupted. "And I'm not going to miss a chance like this, health or no health. You have heard Mr. Conward tell how many people have grown wealthy buying property and selling it again. And I will sell it again—when I get my price," she ended, with a finality that suggested that large profits were already assured.

"It is as your mother says," Conward interjected. "There are many rapid increases in value. I would not be surprised if you should be offered an advance of ten thousand dollars on this place before Fall. It is really a very exceptional investment."

"There must be an end somewhere," Irene murmured, rather weakly. But her mother was writing a cheque. "I shall give you five thousand dollars now," she said, "and the balance when you give me the deed, or whatever it is. That is the proper way, isn't it?"

"Well, it's done," said Irene, with an uneasy laugh, which her excitement pitched a little higher than she had intended.

In an adjoining room Dave Elden heard that laugh, and it stirred some remembrance in him. Instantly he connected it with Irene Hardy. The truth was Irene Hardy had been in the background of his mind during every waking hour since Bert Morrison had dropped her bombshell upon him. How effectively she had dropped it! What a hit she had scored! Dave had ricocheted ever since between amusement and chagrin at her generalship. She had deliberately created for him opportunities—a whole evening full of them—to confess about Irene Hardy, and when he had refused to admit that he had anything to confess she had confounded him with an incident that admitted no explanation. For a moment he had stood speechless, overcome with the significance of what she had said; the next, he reached out to detain her, but she was already on the stairs of her apartment and waving him a laughing good-night. And now that voice—

Dave had no plan. He simply walked into Conward's office. His eye took in the little group, and the mind behind caught something of its portent. Irene's beauty! What a quickening of the pulses was his as he saw in this splendid woman the girl who had stirred and returned his youthful passion! But Dave had poise. Upon a natural ability to take care of himself in a physical sense, environment and training had imposed a mental resourcefulness not easily taken at a disadvantage. He walked straight to Irene.

"I heard your voice," he said, in quiet tones that gave no hint of the emotion beneath. "I am very glad to see you again." He took the hand which she extended in a firm, warm grasp; there was nothing in it, as Irene protested to herself, that was more than firm and warm, but it set her finger-tips a-tingling.

"My mother, Mr. Elden," she managed to say, and she hoped her voice was as well controlled as his had been. Mrs. Hardy looked on the clean-built young man with the dark eyes and the brown, smooth face, but the name suggested nothing. "You remember," Irene went on. "I told you of Mr. Elden. It was at his ranch we stayed when father was hurt."

"But I thought he was a cow *puncher*," exclaimed Mrs. Hardy, with no abatement of the contempt which she always compressed into the one western term which had smuggled into her vocabulary.

"Times change quickly in the West, madam," said Dave. There was nothing in his voice to suggest that he had caught the note in hers. "Most of our business men—at least, those bred in the country—have thrown a lasso in their day. You should hear them brag of their steer-roping yet in the Ranchmen's Club." Irene's eyes danced. Dave had already turned the tables; where her mother had implied contempt he had set up a note of pride. It was a matter of pride among these square-built, daring Western men that they had graduated into their office chairs from the saddle and the out-of-doors.

"Oh, I suppose," said her mother, for lack of a better answer. "Everything is so absurd in the West. But you were good to my daughter, and to poor, dear Andrew. If only he had been spared. Women are so unused to these business responsibilities, Mr. Conward. It is fortunate there are a few reliable firms upon which we can lean in our inexperience."

"Mother has bought a house," Irene explained to Dave. "We thought this was a safe place to come——"

A look on Elden's face caused her to pause. "Why, what is wrong?" she said.

Dave looked at Conward, at Mrs. Hardy, and at Irene. He was instantly aware that Conward had "stung" them. It was common knowledge in inside circles that the bottom was going out. The firm of Conward & Elden had been scurrying for cover; as quietly and secretly as possible, to avoid alarming the public, but scurrying for cover nevertheless. And Dave had acquiesced in that policy. He had little stomach for it, but no other course seemed possible. Conward, he knew, had no scruples. Bert Morrison had been caught in his snare, and now this other and dearer friend had proved a ready victim. As Conward was wont to say, business is business. And he had acquiesced. His position was extremely difficult.

"I don't think I would be in a hurry to buy," he said, slowly turning his eyes on his partner. "You would perhaps be wiser to rent a home for awhile. Rents are becoming easier."

"But I *have* bought," said Mrs. Hardy, and there was triumph rather than regret in her voice. "I have paid my deposit."

"It is the policy of this firm," Elden continued, "not to force or take advantage of hurried decisions. The fact that you have already made a deposit does not alter that policy. I think I may speak for my partner and the firm when I say that your deposit will be held to your credit for thirty days, during which time it will constitute an option on the property which you have selected. If, at the end of that time, you are still of your present mind, the transaction can go through as now planned; and if you have changed your mind your deposit will be returned."

Conward shifted under Dave's direct eye. He preferred to look at Mrs. Hardy. "What Mr. Elden has told you about the policy of the firm is quite true," he managed to say. "But, as it happens, this transaction is not with Conward & Elden, but with me personally. I find it necessary to dispose of the property which I have just sold to you at such an exceptional price"—he was looking at Mrs. Hardy—"I find it necessary for financial reasons to dispose of it, and naturally I cannot run a chance of having my plans overturned by any possible change of mind on your part. Not that I think you will change your mind," he hurried to add. "I think you are already convinced that it is a very good buy indeed."

"I am entirely satisfied," said Mrs. Hardy. "The fact that Mr. Elden wants to get the property back makes me more satisfied," she added, with the peculiarly irritating laugh of a woman who thinks she is extraordinarily shrewd, and is only very silly.

"The agreement is signed?" said Dave. He walked to the desk and picked up the documents, and the cheque that lay upon them. His eye ran down the familiar contract. "This agreement is in the name of Conward & Elden," he said. "This cheque is payable to Conward & Elden."

He was addressing Conward. Conward's livid face had become white, and it was with difficulty he controlled his anger. "They are all printed that way," he explained. "I am going to have them endorsed over to me."

"You are *not*," said Dave. "You are charging this woman twenty-five thousand dollars for a house that won't bring twenty thousand on the open market to-day, and by Fall won't bring ten thousand. The firm of Conward & Elden will have nothing to do with that transaction. It won't even endorse it over."

A fire was burning in the grate. Dave walked to it, and very slowly and deliberately thrust the agreement and the cheque into the flame. For a moment the printed letters stood out after the body of the paper was consumed; then all fell to ashes.

"Well, if that doesn't beat all!" Mrs. Hardy ejaculated. "Are all cow *punchers* so discourteous?"

"I mean no discourtesy," said Dave. "And I hope you will let me say now, what I should have said before, that it was with the deepest regret I learned from your conversation of the death of Dr. Hardy. He was a gentleman who commanded my respect, as he must have commanded the respect of all who knew him. If my behaviour has seemed abrupt I assure you I have only sought to serve Dr. Hardy's widow—and his daughter."

"It is a peculiar service," Mrs. Hardy answered curtly. She felt she had a grievance against Dave. He had not lived down to her conception of what a raw Western youth should be. Even the act of burning the agreement and the cheque, dramatic though it was, had a poise to it that seemed inappropriate. Dave should have snatched the papers—it would have been better had the partners fought over them—he should have crumpled them in rage and consigned them to the fire with curses. Mrs. Hardy felt that in such conduct Dave would have been running true to form. His assumption of the manners of a gentleman annoyed her exceedingly.

"I can only apologize for my partner's behaviour," said Conward. "It need not, however, affect the transaction in the slightest degree. A new agreement will be drawn at once—an agreement in which the firm of Conward & Elden will not be concerned."

"That will be more satisfactory," said Mrs. Hardy. She intended the remark for Dave's ears, but he had moved to a corner of the room and was conversing in low tones with Irene.

"I am sorry I had to make your mother's acquaintance under circumstances which, I fear, she

will not even try to understand," he had said to Irene. "I am sure she will not credit me with unselfish motives."

"Oh, Dave—Mr. Elden, I mean—that is—you don't know how proud—you don't know how much of a *man* you made me feel you are."

She was flushed and excited. "Perhaps I shouldn't talk like this. Perhaps——"

"It all depends on one thing," Dave interrupted.

"What is that?"

"It all depends on whether we are Miss Hardy and Mr. Elden, or whether we are still Reenie and Dave."

Her bright eyes had fallen to the floor, and he could see the tremor of her fingers as they rested on the back of a chair. She did not answer him directly. But in a moment she spoke.

"Mother will buy the house from Mr. Conward," she said. "She is like that. And when we are settled you will come and see me, won't you—Dave?"

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

When the Hardys had gone Conward turned to Elden. "We had better try and find out where we stand," he said, trying to speak dispassionately, but there was a tremor in his voice.

"I agree," returned Elden, who had no desire to evade the issue. "Do you consider it fair to select inexperienced women for your victims?"

Conward made a deprecating gesture. "There is nothing to be gained by quarreling, Dave," he said. "Let us face the situation fairly. Let us get at the facts. When we have agreed as to facts, then we may agree as to procedure."

"Shoot," said Dave. He stood with his shoulder toward Conward, watching the dusk settling about the foothill city. The streets led away into the gathering darkness, and the square brick blocks stood in blue silhouette against a champagne sky. He became conscious of a strange yearning for this young metropolis; a sort of parental brooding over a boisterous, lovable, wayward youth. It was his city; no one could claim it more than he. And it was a good city to look upon, and to mingle in, and to dream about.

"I think," said Conward, "we can agree that the boom is over. Booms feed upon themselves, and eventually they eat themselves up. We have done well, on paper. The thing now is to convert our paper into cash."

Dave turned about. "You know I don't claim to be any great moralist, Conward," he said, "and I have no pity for a gambler who deliberately sits in and gets stung. Consequently I am not troubled with any self-pity, nor any pity for you. And if you can get rid of our holdings to other gamblers I have nothing to say. But if it is to be loaded on to women who are investing the little savings of their lives—women like Bert Morrison and Mrs. Hardy—then I am going to have a good deal to say. And there is that man—what's his name?—Merton, I think; a lunger if there ever was one; tuberculosis written all over him; a widower, too, with a little boy, sent out here as his last chance—you loaded him with stuff where he can't see the smoke of the city, and you call it city property. That's what I want to talk about," said Dave, with rising heat. "If business has to be done that way, then I say, to hell with business!"

"I asked you not to quarrel," Conward returned, with remarkable composure. "I suggested that we get at the facts. That seems to be a business suggestion. I think we are agreed that the boom is over. Values are on the down grade. The boomsters are departing. They are moving on to new fields, as we should have done a year or two ago, but I confess I had a sort of sentiment for this place. Well—that is the price of sentiment. It won't mix with business. Now, granting that the boom is over, where do we stand?"

"We are rated as millionaires, but we haven't a thousand dollars in the bank at this moment. This," he lifted Mrs. Hardy's cheque, "would have seen us over next pay day, but you say the firm must have nothing to do with it. And which is the more immoral—since you have spoken of morality—to accept labour from clerks whom you can't pay, or to sell property to women who say they want it and are satisfied with the price? We make our income by selling property. As soon as the sales stop, the income stops. Well, the sales have stopped. But the expense goes on. We have literally thousands of unsettled contracts. We must keep our staff together. We have debts to pay, and we owe it to our creditors to make collections so that we can pay those debts, and we can't make collections without staff. I sympathize with your feelings on this matter, Dave, but what's a

man to do? It's like war; we must kill or be killed. Business is war, of a kind. Why, on the property we are now holding the taxes alone will amount to twenty thousand dollars a year. And I put it up to you; if we are going to stand on sentiment, who's going to pay the taxes?"

"I know; I know," said Dave, whose anger over the treatment of the Hardys was already subsiding. "We are in the grip of the System. As you have said, it is kill or be killed. Still—in war they don't usually kill women and non-combatants. That is the point I'm trying to make. I've no sentiment about others who are in the game as we are. If you limit your operations to them——"

"The trouble is, you can't. They're wise. They see the bottom going, and they quit. Most of them have already moved on. A few firms, like ourselves, will stay and try to fight it out; try, at least, to close up with a clean sheet, if we must close up. But we can't wind up a business without selling the stock on hand, and to whom are we to sell it, if not to people who want it? That is what you seem to object to."

"You place me in rather an unfair light," Dave protested. "What I object to is taking the life savings of people—people of moderate circumstances, mainly—in exchange for property which we know to be worth next to nothing."

"Yet you admit that we must clean up, don't you?"

"Yes, I suppose so."

"And there's no other way, Dave," said Conward, rising and placing an arm on his partner's shoulder, "I sympathize with your point of view, but, my boy, it's pure sentiment, and sentiment has no place in business. And you remember the terms of our partnership, don't you?"

Dave hesitated a few moments, as he threw his mind back over the years that had gone by since the day when Conward proposed a partnership to him. He saw again his little office where he ground out "stuff" for *The Call*, the littered desk and floor, the cartoons on the walls, the big shears, and the paste pot—yes, the paste pot, and the lock he had installed to protect it, and his select file of time copy, from depredation. And the smell of printer's ink; even yet, when business took Dave into a printing office, the smell of ink brought back those old, happy days. Happy days? When he worked more hours than a man should work, for less salary than a man should get; when the glorious out-of-doors called him and his soul rebelled against the despotism of fate! Yes, surely they were happy days. He smiled a moment as he thought of them; paused to dally with them on his way to an answer for Conward; then skimmed quickly down the surface of events to this present evening. More wonderful had the years been than any dream of fiction; no wizard's wand had ever worked richer magic....

"You remember, don't you?" Conward repeated.

"Oh, about the coal?" Dave laughed. The moment of reminiscence had restored his good humour. "Yes, I suppose it was a bargain. You have held me to it pretty well."

"Let it remain a bargain to the end," said Conward. "It is the only way we can finish up."

Dave dropped the subject. There appeared to be nothing to gain from pursuing it further. They were in the grip of a System—a System which had found them poor, had suddenly made them wealthy, and now, with equal suddenness, threatened to make them poor again. It was like war—kill or be killed. It occurred to Dave that it was even worse than war. War has in it the qualities of the heroic; splendid bravery; immeasurable self-sacrifice; that broad spirit of devotion to a vague ideal which, for lack of a better name, is called patriotism. This System had none of that. It was more like assassination....

Night had settled when Dave left the office. The champagne sky had deepened into a strip of copper; the silhouettes were soft and black; street lights studded the bank of foothills to the west like setting stars. Darkness had tucked the distance that lay between the city and the Rockies in the lap of night, and the great ridge stood up close and clear, prodding its jagged edge into the copper pennant of the day's farewell. A soft wind blew from the south-west; June was in the air. June, too, was in Dave's heart as he walked the few blocks to his bachelor quarters. What of the drab injustice of business? Let him forget that; now it was night ... and she had called him Dave. He climbed the steps to his room with energy and life tingling in his limbs; then he stood in his window and for a long while watched the traffic in the street below. That is, his eyes were directed to the traffic, but what he saw was a merry girl in a brown sweater, showering her glances of admiration upon a raw youth of the ranges whose highest ambition was to break six bottles with six bullets. And she had even held that to be a worthy ambition. She had said, "Perhaps the day is coming when our country will want men who can shoot and ride more than it will want lawyers or professors." He smiled at the recollection of her words. The romantic days of youth! like the mirage of sunrise they fade and are lost in the morning of life.... And their young philosophies! The night they found the dead calf; he had propounded the wisdom that it is always the innocent thing that suffers; that the crittur that can't run gets caught. Well, that seemed to hold good. Wasn't that what Conward had argued to him this very afternoon, and he had found no answer? He wondered what Reenie's experience had been.... And then the compact under the spruce trees.... "Come to me—like that—" she had said, "and then—then we'll know." And to-day she had called him Dave.

He dressed with care. The Chinese boy was never more obsequious in his attentions, and Dave never presented a more manly appearance. It was not until he was about to leave his rooms that he remembered he must dine alone; he had been dressing for her, unconsciously. The realization brought him up with something of a shock. "This will never do," he said, "I can't eat alone to-night. And I can't ask Reenie, so soon after the incident with her mother. I know—Bert Morrison." He reached for the telephone and rang her number. Had anyone charged Dave with fickleness in his affections he would have laughed at the absurdity. Had he not remained true to one great passion through the dangerous decade of his life? A man always thinks of the decade just ended as the dangerous decade. And Bert Morrison was a good friend. As he waited at the telephone he recalled the impulse which had seized him when they had last parted. But the recollection brought only a glow of friendship for Bert. There was no hint of danger in it.

Her number did not answer. He thought of Edith Duncan. But Edith lived at home, and it was much too late to extend a formal dinner invitation. There was nothing for it but to eat alone. He suddenly became conscious of the great loneliness of his bachelor life. After all, he was quite as much alone in the city as he had been in his boyhood in the hills. He began to moralize on this subject of loneliness. It was very evident to him now that his life had been empty and shallow. It was rather evident that any single life is empty and shallow. Nature had made no mistake in decreeing that humans should live in pairs. Dave had never thought much on that point before, but now it struck him as so obvious that none could fail to see its logic. The charm of bachelorhood was a myth which only needed contact with the gentle atmosphere of feminine affection to be exposed.

The Chinese boy coughed deferentially, and Dave was recalled from his reverie. He took his hat and coat and went into the street. It was his custom to take his meals at a modest eating-place on a side avenue, but to-night he directed his steps to the best hotel the city afforded. There was no wisdom in dressing for an event unless he were going to deflect his course somewhat from the daily routine.

The dining hall was a blaze of light; the odour of early roses blended with imported perfumes, and strains of sweet, subdued music trembled through the room in accompaniment to the merry-making of the diners. Dave paused for a moment, awaiting the beck of a waiter, but in that moment his eye fell on Conward, seated at a table with Mrs. Hardy and Irene. Conward had seen him, and was motioning to him to join them. The situation was embarrassing, and yet delightful. He was glad he had dressed for dinner.

"Join us, Elden," Conward said, as he reached their table. "Just a little dinner to celebrate to-day's transaction. You will not refuse to share to that extent?"

Dave looked at Mrs. Hardy. Had he been dealing with Conward and Mrs. Hardy alone he would have excused himself, but he had to think of Irene. That is, he had to justify her by being correct in his manners. And as he looked from mother to daughter he realized that Irene had not inherited all her beauty from her father. In their dinner gowns Mrs. Hardy was sedate and even beautiful, and her daughter ravishing. Dave thought he had not before seen so much womanly charm in any figure.

"Do join us," said Mrs. Hardy. It was evident to Mrs. Hardy that it would be correct for her to support Mr. Conward's invitation.

"You are very kind," said Dave, as he seated himself. "I had not hoped for this pleasure." And yet the pleasure was not unmixed. He felt that Conward had out-played him. It was Conward who had done the gracious thing. And Dave could not prevent Conward doing the gracious thing without himself being ungracious.

He was aware of being under the close scrutiny of Mrs. Hardy. True, Conward sought to monopolize her attention. He had an ingratiating way with strangers; he struck a confidential note that quickly called forth confidence in return, and Dave was chagrined to see that not only was his partner creating the intended impression upon Mrs. Hardy, but his sallies and witticisms were gradually winning response from Irene. And the more he was annoyed at this turn of affairs the less was he able to arrest it. As Conward's guest he could not quarrel, and his fear of overstepping the mark if he engaged in discussion induced a silence which might easily have been mistaken for mental inanition. He contented himself with being punctiliously correct in his table etiquette.

Perhaps he could have followed no wiser course, Dave's manners had an effect upon Mrs. Hardy similar to that which she had experienced from the decent civilization of the western city. To her it seemed impossible that a raw youth, bred on the ranges—a cow puncher—could conduct himself correctly in evening dress at a fashionable table. It was more than impossible—it was heterodox; it was a defiance of all the principles upon which caste is based, and to Mrs. Hardy caste was the one safe line of demarkation between refinement and vulgarity. So she noted Elden's correct deportment, even to—as it seemed to her—his correct modesty in taking little part in the conversation, with a sense that all this was a disguise, and that presently he would, figuratively, burst forth from his linen and broadcloth and stand revealed in schaps and bandana. But the meal progressed with no such development, and Mrs. Hardy had a vague sense that this young man was not dealing fairly with her. He was refusing to live up to her preconceived ideas of what his part should be. Had Mrs. Hardy been capable of analyzing her own emotions

correctly, she would have known that Dave was undermining her belief in caste, and without caste there could be no civilization! But Mrs. Hardy was not a deep self-analyst. Those who accept all distinctions as due to external causes have no occasion to employ any deep mental subtlety in classifying their acquaintances. So, as has been stated, the impression created upon her mind by Elden's proper conduct was one of vague annoyance that proper conduct should be found in one not reared within the charmed circle of the *elite*.

After dinner they sat in the lounge-room, and Conward beguiled the time with stories of sudden wealth which had been practically forced upon men who were now regarded as the business frame-work of the country. As these worthies strolled through the richly furnished room leisurely smoking their after-dinner cigars Conward would make a swift summary of their rise from liveryman, cow puncher, clerk or labourer to their present affluence, occasionally appealing to Dave to corroborate his statements. It was particularly distasteful to Elden to be obliged to add his word to Conward's in such matters, for although Conward carefully refrained from making any direct reference to Mrs. Hardy's purchase, the inference that great profits would accrue to her therefrom was very obvious.

A tall man passed by with a richly gowned woman on his arm. "Jim Farley," Conward explained. "Plasterer by trade. Began dabbling in real estate. Now rated as a millionaire."

Conward paused to light another cigarette. "Interesting case, Farley's," he continued, after a pause. "You remember it, Elden?" Dave nodded. "Farley blew in here from Scotland, or some such place, looking for work with his trowel. That was about the time of the beginning of things, as things are reckoned here. Some unscrupulous dealer learned that Farley had three hundred dollars—it goes to show what has happened even when the motive of the seller could hardly be endorsed as honest business. Well, this dealer learned that Farley had three hundred dollars, and by means of much conviviality he induced him to invest that amount in a pair of lots on a cut-bank in the most outlandish place you can imagine. When Farley came to himself he was so sick over it he moved on to the Coast, and took up his trade of plastering.

"Well, in a couple of years things had happened. The principal thing, so far as Farley's fortunes were concerned, was the decision of a new transcontinental railway to build into this centre. Now it so happened that nature or geology or topography or whatever it is that controls such matters had decreed that the railway must cross Farley's lots. There was no other way in. It became the duty of Conward & Elden to buy those lots. We ascertained his address and wired him an offer of two thousand dollars. There was no time to lose, and we felt that that offer would cinch it. But we had overlooked the fact that Farley was Scotch. Did he accept our offer? He did not. He reasoned like this: 'If I am worth two thousand dollars I can afford a little holiday.' So he threw up his job and in a couple of days he walked into our office. Would he listen to reason? He would not. He knew that an eagle would scarcely choose his property as a building site. He knew that whoever was going to buy those lots was going to buy them because he had to have them—because they were essential to some project. And he simply sat tight.

"To make the story short—how much do you think we paid for them? Ten thousand dollars. Ten thousand dollars cash. And he made us pay the cost of the transfer. You remember that, Elden? We laughed over it at the time. Then he immediately re-invested his little fortune, and today— It's the story of hundreds."

Elden was glad when Mrs. Hardy remembered that she must not remain up late. Her physician had prescribed rest. Early to bed, you know. Still, Mr. Conward's anecdotes were so refreshing, so suggestive of that—what is it you call it?—that spirit of the West, etc. Dave had opportunity for just a word with Irene before they left.

"How did this happen—to-night?" he asked, with the calm assumption of one who has a right to know.

"Oh, Mr. Conward telephoned an invitation to mother," she explained. "I was so glad you happened in. You have had wonderful experiences; it must be inspiring—ennobling—to take such part in the building of a new city; something that will be here forever as a monument to the men of this generation. Mr. Conward is charming, isn't he?"

Dave did not know whether the compliment to Conward was a personal matter concerning his partner, or whether it was to be taken as a courtesy to the firm. In either case he rather resented it. He wondered what Irene would think of this "ennobling" business in the drab days of disillusionment that must soon sweep down upon them. But Irene apparently did not miss his answer.

"We shall soon be settled," she said, as Mrs. Hardy and Conward were seen approaching. "Then you will come and visit us?"

"I will—Reenie," he whispered, and he was sure the colour that mounted in her cheeks held no tinge of displeasure.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Elden lost no time in making his first call upon the Hardys. He had discussed the matter with Irene over the telephone. "We are hardly in order yet," she had explained. "We are in a chaos of house-furnishing, but you will be welcome. And there may be boxes to lift, and carpets to lay, and heavy things to shove about."

He found, however, that very fine order had already been established in the Hardy home, or, at any rate, in that part of it available to visitors. Mrs. Hardy would have barred, with her own robust body if necessary, his admission into any such surroundings as Irene had pictured. Irene received him cordially, but Mrs. Hardy evinced no more warmth than propriety demanded. Elden, however, allowed himself no annoyance over that. A very much greater grievance had been thrust upon his mind. Conward had preceded him, and was already a guest of the Hardys.

Dave had accepted the fact of Conward's dinner party as a natural enough occurrence, and after Irene's explanation he had dismissed it from his mind. Conward's presence in the Hardy home was a more serious matter. He knew Conward well enough to know that purpose always lay behind his conduct, and during the small talk with which they whiled away an hour his mind was reaching out acutely, exploring every nook of possibility, to arrive, if it could, at some explanation of the sudden interest which Conward was displaying in the Hardys. These explanations narrowed down to two almost equally unpalatable. Conward was deliberately setting about to capture the friendship, perhaps the affection, of either Mrs. Hardy or Irene. Strangely enough, Elden was more irritated by the former alternative than by the latter. He felt that if Conward's purposes were directed towards Irene that was at least fair warfare; he could not bring himself to think similarly of a suit that involved Mrs. Hardy. Perhaps this attitude was due to subconscious recognition of the fact that he had much more to fear from Conward as a suitor for the hand of Mrs. Hardy than as a rival for that of Irene. On the latter score he had no misgivings; he was confident of his ability to worst any adversary in that field, and competition would lend a piquancy to his courtship not altogether without advantages; but he had no such confidence in the case of an assault upon the heart of the elder woman. He could not become Conward's rival in such a case, and, repugnant as the idea was to him, he felt no assurance that such a match might not develop. And Conward, as a prospective father-in-law, was a more grievous menace to his peace of mind than Conward as a defeated rival.

The more he contemplated this aspect of the case the less he liked it. He would not do Conward the compliment of supposing that he had, or might develop, a genuine attachment for Mrs. Hardy. It was true that Mrs. Hardy, notwithstanding her years and her eccentricities, had a certain stateliness of manner through which at times protruded a reckless frankness that lent a unique charm to her personality, but it was impossible to suppose that Conward had been captivated by these interesting qualities. To Conward the affair could be nothing more than an adventure, but it would give him a position of a sort of semi-paternal authority over both Irene and Elden. Fortunately for his train of thought, which was floundering into more and more difficult travel, the prospect of having to appeal to Conward for the honour of Irene's hand in marriage touched Dave's sense of humour, and he suddenly burst into inappropriate laughter in the course of Mrs. Hardy's panegyric upon the life and morals of her late husband.

Mrs. Hardy contracted her eyebrows.

"I beg your pardon," said Dave. "I have to confess I allowed my wits to go rambling, and they stumbled upon a—upon a very amusing absurdity." Elden's mind was engaged with Mrs. Hardy and Conward, and, unintentionally, he allowed his eyes to embrace them both in his remark. One more astute than Mrs. Hardy might have had a glimmer of the absurdity which had provoked Dave's untimely mirth, but she was a woman who took herself with much seriousness. If Conward guessed anything he concealed his intuition behind a mask of polite attention.

Mrs. Hardy addressed a severe gaze at Elden. "You should keep your wits better in hand, young man. When you find them rambling it might be well to—ah—*lasso* them. Ha, ha, Mr. Conward. That's the word, is it not? *Lasso* them." This unexpected witticism on Mrs. Hardy's part had the fortunate effect of restoring that lady's good humour, and Elden found an easy way out of the situation by joining in the general laughter.

"I fear a thought would be a somewhat elusive thing to get a rope on," he ventured.

"But if it could be done, Dave would do it," Irene interjected. "You remember—"

"Dave?" said Mrs. Hardy, sharply. "You mean Mr. Elden."

The colour rose in the young woman's cheeks, but she stood by her guns. "He was Dave in those days," she said. "It would be impossible to think of a *mister* galloping about over the foothills, swinging his lariat, or smashing bottles with his six-shooter. Mister fits in with the conventions; with tailors and perfume and evening dress, but it doesn't seem to have any place in the foothills."

"You're right," Conward agreed. "Mister has no place on horseback. If you were to go out on

the ranges and begin mistering the cow-punchers, like as not they'd lead you into camp at a rope-end. No man really makes much of a hit in this country until everybody calls him by his first name."

"Well, Mr. Elden seems to have made a hit, as you call it, with some of his acquaintances," said Mrs. Hardy, with a touch of acidity. "I think, Irene, you would do well to remember that we are not out on the ranges, and that Mr. Elden no longer pursues his living with a lariat."

"It may be a point of view I have acquired in the West," Irene persisted. "But I think it a greater courtesy to address a man by his Christian name than by any artificial title. It is something like admitting a guest into the kitchen—a privilege not extended to the casual visitor. It seems like taking him into the family——"

"Merciful Heaven!" exclaimed Mrs. Hardy. "Have we come to that?"

Irene's cheeks and eyes grew brighter still. "Oh, I didn't mean that," she protested. "I was—I was employing a figure of speech."

So the talk drifted on, sometimes safely, sometimes through tortuous channels that threatened at any moment to over-turn their little shell of convention. But no such catastrophe occurred, and when, at length, Mrs. Hardy began to show signs of weariness, Irene served coffee and cake, and the two men, taking that as an intimation that their welcome had run down, but would re-wind itself if not too continually drawn upon, left the house together. On their way they agreed that it was a very beautiful night.

Dave turned the situation over in his mind with some impatience. Irene had now been in the city for several weeks, and he had had opportunity for scarce a dozen personal words with her. Was he to be baulked by such an insufferable chaperonage as it seemed the purpose of Mrs. Hardy and Conward to establish over his love affair? No. In the act of undressing he told himself No, suiting to the word such vigour of behaviour that in the morning he found his shoes at opposite corners of the room. No! He who, as a boy, had not hesitated to assert a sort of proprietorship over Irene, would not hesitate now— He was keyed to the heroic.

Several days passed without any word from Irene, and he had almost made up his mind to attempt another telephone appointment, when he met her, quite accidentally, in the street. It was a beautiful afternoon; warm, but not hot, with a fresh breeze from the mountains flowing through the unclouded heavens, and a radiant sun pouring down upon all. But Irene looked more radiant still. She had been shopping, she said. The duty of household purchases fell mainly upon her. Her mother rested in the afternoons——

"How about a cup of tea?" said Dave. "And a thin sandwich? And a delicate morsel of cake? One can always count on thin sandwiches and delicate morsels of cake. Their function is purely a social one, having no relation to the physical requirements."

"I should be very glad," said Irene.

They found a quiet tea-room. When they were seated Dave, without preliminaries, plunged into the subject nearest his heart.

"I have been wanting an opportunity to talk to you—wanting it for weeks," he said. "But it always seemed——"

"Always seemed that you were thwarted," Irene completed his thought. "You didn't disguise your annoyance very well the other night."

"Do you blame me for being annoyed?"

"No. But I rather blame you for showing it. You see, I was annoyed too."

"Then you had nothing to do with—with bringing about the situation that existed?"

"Certainly not. Surely you do not think that I would—that I would——"

"I beg your pardon, Reenie," said Dave, contritely. "I should have known better. But it seemed such a strange coincidence."

She was toying with her cup, and for once her eyes avoided him. "You should hardly think, Dave," she ventured,— "you should hardly conclude that—what has been, you know, gives you the right—entitles you——"

"To a monopoly of your attentions. Perhaps not. But it gives me the right to a fair chance to win a monopoly of your attentions." He was speaking low and earnestly, and his voice had a deep, rich timbre in it that thrilled and almost frightened her. She could not resent his straightforwardness. She felt that he was already asserting his claim upon her, and there was something tender and delightful in the sense of being claimed by such a man.

"I must have a fair chance to win that monopoly," he repeated. "How did it happen that Conward was present?"

"I don't know. It just happened. A little after you telephoned me he called up and asked for mother, and the next I knew she said he was coming up to spend the evening. And then I said you were coming."

"And what did she say?"

Irene hesitated. "Please don't make me tell you," she whispered at length.

"Don't hesitate from any fear of hurting me," he said, with a laugh. "I know I have failed to make a hit with your mother. On your account I could wish I had been more successful, but perhaps she will be fairer when she knows me better. What did she say?"

"She just said, 'That cow *puncher*.' And I just told her that you were the man who put the punch in the Conward & Elden firm—you see I am learning your slang—and that everybody says so, and a few more things I told her, too."

But Dave had dropped into a sudden reverie. It was not so remarkable as it seemed that Conward should have telephoned Mrs. Hardy almost immediately after he had used the line. Conward's telephone and Dave's were on the same circuit; it was a simple matter for Conward, if he had happened to lift the receiver during Dave's conversation with Irene, to overhear all that was said. That might happen accidentally; at least, it might begin innocently enough. The fact that Conward had acted upon the information indicated two things; first, that he had no very troublesome sense of honour—which Dave had long suspected—and second, that he had deliberately planned a confliction with Dave's visit to the Hardy home. This indicated a policy of some kind; a scheme deeper than Dave was as yet able to fathom. He would at least guard against any further eavesdropping on his telephone.

He took a card from his pocket, and made some figures on it. "If you should have occasion to call me at the office at any time, please use that number, and ask for me," he said. "It is the accountant's number. There's a reason."

It flattered his masculine authority that she put the card in her purse without comment. She did not ask him to explain. Dave knew that when a woman no longer asks for explanations she pays man her highest compliment.

The cups were empty; the sandwiches and cake were gone, but they lingered on.

"I have been wondering," Dave ventured at length, "just where I stand—with you. You remember our agreement?"

She averted her eyes, but her voice was steady. "You have observed the terms?" she said.

"Yes—in all essential matters. I come to you now—in accordance with those terms. You said that we would know. Now *I* know; know as I have always known since those wonderful days in the foothills; those days from which I date my existence. Anything worth while that has ripened in my life was sown by your smile and your confidence and your strange pride in me, back in those sunny days. And I would repay it all—and at the same time double my debt—by returning it to you, if I may."

"I realize that I owe you an answer, now, Dave," she said, frankly. "And I find it very hard to make that answer. Marriage means so much more to a woman than it does to a man. I know you don't think so, but it does. Man, after the honeymoon, returns to his first love—his day's work. But woman cannot go back.... Don't misunderstand me, Dave. I would be ashamed to say I doubt myself, or that I don't know my mind, but you and I are no longer boy and girl. We are man and woman now. And I just want time—just want time to be *sure* that—that—"

"I suppose you are right," he answered. "I will not try to hurry your decision. I will only try to give you an opportunity to know—to be sure, as you said. Then, when you are sure, you will speak. I will not re-open the subject."

His words had something of the ring of an ultimatum, but no endearments that his lips might have uttered could have gripped her heart so surely. She knew they were the words of a man in deadly earnest, a man who had himself in hand, a man who made love with the same serious purpose as he had employed in the other projects of his successful life. She raised her eyes to his fine face. Decision was stamped all over it; from the firm jaw to the steady eyes that met her own. Suddenly she began to tremble. It was not fear. Afterwards she knew it to have been pride—pride in his great masterly manfulness; in a judgment so sure of itself that it dallied not a moment in stating the terms upon which all future happiness might hang. For if Dave had misread Irene's heart he had deliberately closed the only door through which he might hope to approach it. But Irene instinctively knew that he had not misread her heart; it seemed that this bold, daring manoeuvre had captured the citadel at a stroke. Had it not been for some strange sense of shame—some fear that too ready capitulation might be mistaken for weakness—she would have surrendered then.

"I think that is best," she managed so say. "We will let our acquaintanceship ripen."

He rose and helped her with her light wrap. His fingers touched her hand, and it seemed to

him the battle was won.... But he had promised not to re-open the subject.

In the street he said, "If you will wait a moment I will take you home in my car." Their eyes met, and each of them knew what it meant. It meant announcement to her mother that she had met Dave down town. It meant, perhaps, a supposition on her mother's part that she had gone down town for that purpose. It was far-reaching. But she said simply, "I should enjoy driving home with you."

On the way they planned that the following Sunday they would drive into the foothills together. Of course they would ask Mrs. Hardy to accompany them. Of course. But it might happen that Mrs. Hardy would be indisposed. She was tired with the numerous duties incident to settling in a new home. Irene was of the opinion that what her mother needed now was rest.

As it happened, Mrs. Hardy was at the gate. She greeted Dave cordially enough; it was not possible for Mrs. Hardy to quite forget her conventional training, just as it was not possible for her to quite forget that Dave was a one-time cow puncher. Encouraged by her mood Irene determined to settle the Sunday programme at once.

"Dave was good enough to bring me up in his car," she said. "And just think! He invites us to drive into the foothills with him next Sunday. Will you come? It will be delightful. Or are you feeling——"

"Mr. Elden is very kind," said Mrs. Hardy, with dignity. "I have no doubt Mr. Conward will accompany us. He is to call this evening, and I will ask him.... Yes, I think it very likely we will go."

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

The summer wore on, and autumn followed on its heels. The processes which had been discerned by Conward and other astute operators were now apparent to the mob which forever follows in the wake of the successful, but usually at such a distance as to be overwhelmed in the receding flood. The forces which had built up fabulous fortunes were now in reverse gear, and the same mechanism that had built up was now tearing down. As the boom had fed upon itself, carrying prices to heights justifiable only to the most insane optimism, so did the subsequent depression bear down upon values until they reached depths justifiable only to the most abandoned despondency. Building operations came to a standstill. Carpenters, masons, bricklayers, painters, plumbers, labourers found themselves out of employment. As, in most instances, they had lived to the extent of their income in the prosperous period, or had invested their surpluses in the all-alluring real estate, they were promptly confronted with the necessity of finding work; if not at home, elsewhere. Their exodus left vacant houses; the reduced volume of trade necessary for a smaller and more frugal population was speedily reflected in empty shops and office buildings. With houses, shops, and office buildings empty or rented at prices which did not pay interest on the investment there was no inducement to build more houses, shops, or office buildings. With no inducement to build houses, shops, or office buildings there was no demand for vacant lots. With no demand for vacant lots, no value attached to them. The rosy bubble, inflated with the vapours of irresponsible speculation, had dissolved in thin air.

It could not be called a collapse. There was no panic, no crash. There was no wild rush to sell. One cannot sell without buyers, and there were no buyers. A certain latent optimism, justified in part by the undeniable natural advantages of the city, kept the flame of hope alive in the hearts of investors, or, perhaps, suffered it to be gradually diminished rather than extinguished by one icy blast of despair.

Mrs. Hardy was among the last to admit that she had bought on an ebbing tide. She contended that her house was well worth the price she had paid; what if speculation had come to a stop? So much the better; her house was still worth its price. She would stand firm. It was not until the Metfords, whose ostentation had brought them before her notice, attempted to sell their home at a tremendous sacrifice, and had found it impossible to get an offer, that Mrs. Hardy began seriously to consider her predicament. Mrs. Metford had sold the car and discharged the "chiffonier," and Mr. Metford had returned to his ancient and honourable calling of coal freighter.

Mrs. Hardy consulted Conward. It had grown to be her habit to consult Conward on all matters in which she found an interest. Conward had gone out of his way to make himself agreeable to Mrs. Hardy and her daughter, with, in the case of the former, considerable success. His status with Irene was not so well defined, but the frequency of his visits to the Hardy home afforded the opportunity for an attachment to be developed by insensible degrees, and the day was nearing when Conward would wish to trade upon that attachment.

"How is it, Mr. Conward," Mrs. Hardy said to him one evening over her fancy work, for she

practised an indefatigable industry in matters of no importance,—“How is it that there is no demand for property? You are a real estate expert; you should be able to answer that.”

“It is simple enough,” Conward answered. “It is all a matter of confidence. So long as confidence was maintained, prices continued to advance. When confidence began to be shaken, prices hesitated. If confidence should disappear, values would follow suit.”

“But why should confidence disappear? Isn't this city as good to-day as it was a year ago? Doesn't it occupy the same site? Are not the farms still producing?”

“That's just it, dear Mrs. Hardy. Why, indeed? Simply because the booster has given way to the calamity howler. Its psychological explanation is simple enough. The world lives by faith. Without faith there would be neither seed-time nor harvest. That is true of raising cities, as well as raising crops. But there are always those who ridicule faith; always were, always will be. And as soon as faith disappears, things begin to sink. Just like John, or whoever it was, on the water —”

“Peter, I think,” corrected Mrs. Hardy. “Yes, yes, I begin to understand.”

“Well, it's just like that. I may be a little off colour on my scripture, but I have the principle of it, and that's the main thing. And as soon as a city loses faith it begins to sink, just like Peter in the Red Sea.”

“I don't think it was the Red Sea,” said Mrs. Hardy gently. “But that is a matter of detail. As you say, the principle is the main thing. So we owe all this—these empty houses and shops, unsalable property, and everything, to those who have lost faith—or never had it. To men like Mr. Elden, for instance. You remember how he tried to discourage me from the very first—tried to break down my faith—that was it, Mr. Conward—I see it all very plainly now—and he and others like him have brought things to their present pass. Well, they have a great responsibility.”

Conward, practised though he was in the arts of simulation, found difficulty in maintaining a serious appearance. It had not occurred to him that when a woman conceives a dislike for a man, her mind may lend itself to processes of deductions that will ultimately saddle the unfortunate offender with the responsibility for circumstances with which he is not in the most remote manner connected. It was the most natural thing in the world for a mind like Mrs. Hardy's, quite without premeditated injustice, to find in Dave Elden the cause of effects as far removed as was the collapse of the boom from the good advice he had given her that day in Conward's office. Conward found the experience an illuminating one. It was rich with hints of the possibilities that might arise from apparently innocent sentences dropped at opportune moments. It was proof that the danger of consequences lies, not in wronging your neighbour, but in allowing your neighbour to suspect that you wrong him.

As a result of this discussion, Dave found himself rather less popular with Mrs. Hardy than before. She treated him with distant civility, showing such courtesies as convention demanded as an honour, not to Elden, but to herself. Dave accepted her displeasure with a light-heartedness that was extremely trying to the good woman's temper. Had it not been for his desire to spare Irene any unhappiness, he would have treated it with open flippancy. He was engaged in a much more serious business than the cajolery of an old woman's whims. He was engaged in the serious business of capturing the heart of Irene Hardy—a task made none the easier by the self-imposed condition that he must conduct no offensive, but must await with such patience as he could command the voluntary capitulation of the besieged. On the whole, he told himself he had no reason to be dissatisfied with the progress of events. He and Irene often motored together, frequently accompanied by Mrs. Hardy, sometimes by Conward as well, but occasionally alone. And Irene made no secret of the fact that she preferred the trips in which only she and Dave participated. On such occasions the warm summer afternoons found them wandering far over the prairies, without thought of the homeward trail until the setting sun poured its ribbon of gold along the crest of the Rockies. The country, with its long, rolling sweeps of prairie, its clusters of dark green poplars; its rugged foothills from which grey roots of rock protruded, and the blue background of the mountains, afforded a scene to charm her artist soul, and daring and more daring were the splashes of colour which she committed to canvas in her attempt to catch the moods of light and shade that played over such a landscape. And if she did not speak of love with her lips, she had eyes....

The gradual shrinkage of values to the vanishing point imposed upon Dave many business duties which he would very gladly have evaded. The office of Conward & Elden, which had once been besieged by customers eager to buy, was now a centre of groups no less eager to sell; and when they could not sell they contrived to lay the blame upon the firm which had originally sold to them. Although, for the most part, these were men and women who had bought purely from the gambler's motive, they behaved toward the real estate dealer as though he had done them an injustice when the finger of fortune turned up a loss instead of a profit. For such people Dave had little sympathy, and if they persisted in their murmurings he told them so with becoming frankness. But there were cases that could not be turned away with a sharp answer. Bert Morrison, for instance. Bert had never mentioned her “investment” since the occasion already recorded; she greeted Dave with the sociability due to their long-standing friendship; and her calm avoidance of the subject hurt him more than the abuse of all his irate patrons. Then there was Merton, the widower with the sick lungs and the motherless boy, who had brought his little

savings to the West in the hope of husbanding out his life in the dry, clear atmosphere, and saving his son from the white death that had already invaded their little family. With a cruelty almost unbelievable, Conward had talked this man into the purchase of property so far removed from the city as to possess no value except as farm land; and the little savings, which were to ward off sickness and death, or, if that could not be, minister modest comfort in the declining hours of life, had been exchanged for property which, even at the time of the transaction, was valueless and unsalable.

Merton had called on Dave with respect to his investment. Dave had at first been disposed to tell him frankly that the property, for which he had paid twenty dollars a foot, was barely worth that much an acre. But a second look at the man changed his purpose.

"I know you were stung, Merton," he said, "shamelessly stung. You are one of those unsuspecting fellows who think everybody is going to play fair with them. You belong to the class who keep all kinds of rogues and scoundrels in easy circumstances. You might almost be charged with being accessories. Now, just to show how I feel about it—how much did you pay for these lots?"

"Three thousand dollars. It was all I had."

"Of course it was. If you had had more you would have paid more. I suppose Conward justified himself with the argument that if he didn't take your easy money some one else would, which is doubtless true. But just to show how I feel about it—I'll buy those lots from you, for three thousand dollars."

"I can't do it, Mr. Elden; I can't do it," said Merton, and there was moisture on his cheeks. "That would be charity—and I can't take it. But I'm much obliged. It shows you're square, Mr. Elden, and I hold no illwill to *you*."

"Well, can I help you in some way you *will* accept? I'm afraid—I don't mean to be unkind, but we may as well be frank—I'm afraid you won't need help very long."

Merton answered as one who has made up his mind to the inevitable, and Dave thought better of him. This little wreck of a man—this child in business matters—could look death in the face without a quiver.

"Not so long," he said. "I felt ever so much better when I came here first; I thought I was really going to be well again. But when I found what a mistake I had made I began to worry, not for myself, you know, but the boy, and worry is just what my trouble lives on. I have been working a little, and boarding out, and the boy is going to school. But I can't do heavy work, and work of any kind is hard to get. I find I can't keep going that way."

Merton looked with dreamy eyes through the office window, while Dave was turning over the hopelessness of his position, and inwardly cursing a system which made such conditions possible. Society protects the physically weak from the physically strong; the physical highwayman usually gets his deserts; but the mental highwayman preys upon the weak and the inexperienced and the unorganized, and Society votes him a good citizen and a success.

"I had a plan," Merton continued, half-apologetically, as though his plan did him little credit; "I had a plan, but it can't be worked out. I have been trying to raise a little money on my lots, but the mortgage people just look at me."

"What is your plan?" said Dave, kindly. "Any plan, no matter how bad, is always better than no plan."

"I thought," said Merton, timidly,— "I thought if I could build a little shack on the lots I could live there with the boy and we could raise a very fine garden. The soil is very fertile, and at least we should not starve. And the gardening would be good for me, and I could perhaps keep some chickens, and work out at odd jobs as well. But it takes money to build even a very small shack."

"How much money?" demanded Dave.

"If I had a hundred dollars—"

"Bring your title to me to-morrow; to me, personally, you understand. I'll advance you five hundred dollars."

Merton sprang up, and there was more enthusiasm in his eyes than had seemed possible "You will? But I don't need that much—"

"Then use the surplus to live on."

So the Merton affair was straightened away in a manner which left Dave more at peace with his conscience. But another event, much more dramatic and far-reaching in its effects upon his life, was already ripe for the enacting.

Business conditions had necessitated unwonted economy in the office affairs of Conward & Elden, as a result of which many old employees had been laid off, and others had been replaced

by cheaper and less experienced labour. Stenographers who had been receiving a hundred dollars a month could not readily bring themselves to accept fifty, and some of them had to make way for new girls, fresh from the business colleges. Such a new girl was Gladys Wardin; pretty, likeable, inexperienced. Her country home had offered no answer to her ambitions, and she had come to the city with the most dangerous equipment a young woman can carry—an attractive face and an unsophisticated confidence in the goodness of humanity. Conward had been responsible for her position in the office, and Dave had given little thought to her, except to note that she was a willing worker and of comely appearance.

Returning to the office one Saturday evening Dave found Miss Wardin making up a bundle of paper, pencils, and carbon paper. She was evidently in high spirits, and he smilingly asked if she intended working at home over Sunday.

"Oh, didn't Mr. Conward tell you?" she answered, as though surprised that the good news had been kept a secret. "He is going to spend a day or two at one of the mountain hotels, and I am to go along to do his correspondence. Isn't it just lovely? I have so wanted to go to the mountains, but never felt that I could afford it. And now I can combine business with pleasure."

The smile died out of Dave's eyes, and his face became more set and stern than she had ever seen it. "Why, what's the matter, Mr. Elden?" she exclaimed. "Is anything wrong?"

He found it hard to meet her frank, unsuspecting eyes; hard to draw back the curtains of the world so much that those eyes would never again be quite so frank and unsuspecting.... "Miss Wardin," he said, "did Conward tell you that?"

"What? About going to the mountains? Of course. He said he was taking some work with him, and he wondered if I would mind going along to do it, and he would pay the expenses, and—and ___"

There was a quick hard catch in her voice, and she seized Elden's arm violently. Her eyes were big and round; her pretty face had gone suddenly white.

"Oh, Mr. Elden, you don't think—you don't think that I—that he—you wouldn't believe *that*?"

"I think you are absolutely innocent," he said, gravely, "but—it's the innocent thing that gets caught." Suddenly, even in that tense moment, his mind leaped over the gulf of years to the night when he had said to Irene Hardy, "I don't know nothin' about the justice of God. All I know is the crittur 'at can't run gets caught." It was so of Irene's pet; it was so of poor, tubercular Merton; it was to be so of pretty Gladys Wardin—

But the girl had broken into violent tears. "Whatever shall I do—what can I do?" she moaned. "Oh, why didn't somebody tell me? What *can* I do—"

He let her passion run on for a few minutes, and then he sought, as gently as he could, to win her back to some composure. "Some one *has* told you," he said,— "in time. You don't have to go. Don't be afraid of anything Conward may do. *I* will settle this score with him."

She controlled herself, but when she spoke again her voice had fear and shame in it. "I—I hate to tell you, Mr. Elden, but I must tell you—I—I took—I let him give me some money—to buy things—he said maybe I was short of money, and I would want to buy some new clothes—and he would pay me extra, in advance—and he gave me fifty dollars—and—and—*I've spent it!*"

Elden swung on his heel and paced the length of the office in quick, sharp strides. When he returned to where Miss Wardin stood, wrapped about in her misery, his fists were clenched and the veins stood out on the back of his hands. "Scoundrel," he muttered, "scoundrel. And I have been tied to him. I have let him blind me; I have let him set the standards; I have let him *weigh the coal*. Well, now I know him." There was a menace in his last words that frightened even Gladys Wardin, well though she knew the menace was not to her, but ranged in her defence.

"Here," he said, taking some bills from his pocket. "You must tell him you can't go—tell him you *won't* go; you must return his money; I will lend you what you need. Don't be afraid; I will go with you—"

"But I can't take *your* money, either, Mr. Elden," she protested. "I can't stay here any longer; I will have no job, and I can't pay you back. You see I can't take it even from you. What a fool I was! For a few clothes—"

"You will continue to work—for me," he said.

She shook her head. "No. I can't. I can't work anywhere near him."

"You won't need to. The firm of Conward & Elden will be dissolved at once. I have always felt that there was something false in Conward—something that wouldn't stand test. I thought it was in his business life; and yet that didn't quite seem to give the answer. Now I know."

There was the sound of a key in the street door, and Conward entered.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Conward paused as he entered the room. He had evidently not expected to find Elden there, but after a moment of hesitation he nodded cordially to his partner.

"Almost ready, Miss Wardin?" he asked, cheerily. "Our train goes in——" He took his watch from his pocket and consulted it.

Dave's eyes were fixed on the girl. He wondered whether, in this testing moment, she would fight for herself or lean weakly on him as her protector. Her answer reassured him.

"It makes no difference when it goes, Mr. Conward. I'm not going on it." Her voice trembled nervously, but there was no weakness in it.

The money which Dave had given her was still crumpled in her hand. She advanced to where Conward stood vaguely trying to sense the situation, and held the bills before him. "Here is your money, Mr. Conward," she said.

"Why, what does this mean?"

"Here is your money. Will you take it please?"

"No, I won't take it, until you explain——"

She opened her fingers, and the bills fell to the floor. "All right," she said.

Conward's eyes had shifted to Dave. "You are at the bottom of this, Elden," he said. "What does it mean?"

"It means, Conward," Dave answered, and there was steel in his voice—"it means that after all these years I have discovered what a cur you are—just in time to baulk you, at least in this instance."

Conward flushed, but he maintained an attitude of composure. "You've been drinking, Dave," he said. "I meant no harm to Miss Wardin."

"Don't make me call you a liar as well as a cur."

The word cut through Conward's mask of composure. "Now by God I won't take that from any man," he shouted, and with a swing of his arms threw his coat over his shoulders. Dave made no motion, and Conward slowly brought his coat back to position.

"I was right," said Dave, calmly. "I knew you wouldn't fight. You think more of your skin than you do of your honour. Well—it's better worth protection."

"If this girl were not here," Conward protested. "I will not fight——"

"Oh, I will leave," said Miss Wardin, with alacrity. "And I hope he soaks you well," she shot back, as the door closed behind her. But by this time Conward had assumed a superior attitude. "Dave," he said, "I won't fight over a quarrel of this kind. But remember, there are some things in which no man allows another to interfere. Least of all such a man as you. There are ways of getting back, and I'll get back."

"Why such a man as me? I know I haven't been much of a moralist in business matters—I've been in the wrong company for that—but I draw the line——"

"Oh, you're fine stuff, all right. What would your friend Miss Hardy think if I told her all I know?"

"You know nothing that could affect Miss Hardy's opinion——"

"No?"

"No, you don't. You're not bluffing a tenderfoot now. I call you. If you've any cards—play them."

"It's too bad your memory is so poor," Conward sneered. "Why were your lights off that night I passed your car? Oh, I guess you remember. What will Miss Hardy think of that?"

For a moment Dave was unable to follow Conward's thought. Then his mind reached back to that night he drove into the country with Bert Morrison, when on the brow of a hill he switched off his lights that they might the better admire the majesty of the heavens. That Conward should place an evil interpretation upon that incident was a thing so monstrous, so altogether beyond argument, that Dave fell back upon the basic human method reserved for such occasions. His fist

leapt forward, and Conward crumpled up before it.

Conward lay stunned for a few minutes; then with returning consciousness, he tried to sit up. Dave helped him to a chair. Blood flowed down his face, and, as he began to realize what had occurred, it was joined with tears of pain, rage, humiliation.

"You got that one on me, Elden," he said, after awhile. "But it was a coward's blow. You hit me when I wasn't looking. Very well. Two can play at that game. I'll hit you when you're not looking ... where you don't expect it ... where you can't hit back. You interfere with me—you strike me—you that I took out of a thirty-dollar-a-week job and made you all you are. I did it, Dave; gave you the money to start with, coached you all the way. And you hit me ... when I wasn't looking." He spoke disjointedly; his throat was choked with mortification and self-pity. "Very well. I know the stake you're playing for. And—I'm going to spoil it."

He turned his swollen, bloody face to Dave's, and hatred stood up in his eyes as he uttered the threat. "I'll hit you, Dave," he repeated, "where you can't hit back."

"Thanks for the warning," said Elden. "So Irene Hardy is to be the stake. All right; I'll sit in. And I'll win."

"You'll think you've won," returned Conward, leeringly. "And then you'll find out that you didn't. I'll present her to you, Dave, like that." He lifted a burnt match from an ash tray and held it before him.

Dave's impulse was to seize the thick, flabby throat in his hands and choke it lifeless. With a resolute effort he turned to the telephone and lifted the receiver.

"Send a car and a doctor to Conward & Elden's office," he said, when he had got the desired number. "Mr. Conward has been hurt; fell against a desk, or something. Nothing serious, but may need a stitch or two." Then, turning to Conward, "It will depend on you whether this affair gets to the public. On you, and Miss Wardin. Make your own explanations. And as soon as you are able to be about our partnership will be dissolved."

Conward was ready enough to adopt Dave's suggestion that their quarrel should not come to the notice of the public, and Gladys Wardin apparently kept her own counsel in the matter. In a time when firms were going out of business without even the formality of an assignment, and others were being absorbed by their competitors, the dissolution of the Conward & Elden establishment occasioned no more than passing notice. The explanation, "for business reasons," given to the newspapers, seemed sufficient. Some few may have had surmises, but they said nothing openly. Bert Morrison, for example, meeting Dave in the street, congratulated him upon the change. "I knew you would find him out some day;" she said. "Find what out?" Dave questioned, with feigned surprise. "Oh, nothing," was her enigmatic answer, as she changed the subject.

Irene Hardy found herself in a position of increasing delicacy. Since the day of their conversation in the tea-room Dave had been constant in his attentions, but, true to his ultimatum, had uttered no word that could in any way be construed to be more or less than Platonic. His attitude vexed and pleased her. She was vexed that he should leave her in a position where she must humiliate herself by taking the initiative; she was pleased with his strength, with his daring, with the superb self-control with which he carried out a difficult purpose. Just how difficult was that purpose Irene was now experiencing in her own person. She had now no doubt that she felt for Dave that attachment without which ceremonies are without avail, and with which ceremonies are but ceremonies. And yet she shrank from surrender.... And she knew that some day she must surrender.

The situation was complicated by conditions which involved her mother—and Conward. Mrs. Hardy had never allowed herself to become reconciled to Dave Elden. She refused to abandon her preconceived ideas of the vulgarity which through life must accompany one born to the lowly status of cow puncher. The fact that Dave, neither in manner nor mind, gave any hint of that vulgarity which she chose to associate with his early occupation, did not in the least ameliorate her aversion. Mrs. Hardy, without knowing it, was as much a devotee of caste as any Oriental. And Dave was born out of the caste. Nothing could alter that fact. His assumption of the manners of a gentleman merely aggravated his offence.

It was also apparent that Conward's friendship for Mrs. Hardy did not react to Dave's advantage. Conward was careful to drop no word in Irene's hearing that could be taken as a direct reflection upon Dave, but she was conscious of an influence, a magnetism, it almost seemed, the whole tendency of which was to pull her away from Elden. She knew there had been trouble between the two men, and that their formal courtesy, when they met at her mother's house, was formal only; but neither admitted her into the secret. Dave did not venture to speak of the quarrel and Conward's threat, partly from a sense of delicacy; partly from a curiously strained point of honour that that would be taking an unfair advantage of Conward; but most, perhaps, because of his complete assurance that Conward would never be able to carry his threat into effect. He had absolutely no misgivings on that score. Conward, on the other hand, knew that his standing with Irene would not, as yet, justify him in playing any trump card. He realized that the girl's affections were placed on Elden, but he trusted, by winning for himself an intimate

position in the family, to grow gradually into more favourable relationship with her. Conward had a manner, a mildness of voice, a confidential note in his words, which had not failed him on previous occasions, and although he now stalked bigger game than ever before he had no serious doubt of ultimate success. As for Irene, a certain aversion which she had felt for Conward at first did disappear under the influence of his presence in the household and the courteous attentions, which, although directed to her mother, were in some degree reflected upon herself.

It would not be true to say that Irene's acquaintance with Conward made it more difficult for her to accept the terms of Dave's ultimatum. She regarded the two men from a totally different point of view, and there seemed no reason why her vision of one should in any way obscure her vision of the other. One was merely a friend of the family, to be treated on grounds of cordial good-fellowship; the other was her prospective husband. It was no consideration for Conward that sealed her lips. There was another matter, however, which bore heavily upon her pride, and strewed her path with difficulties.

Mrs. Hardy had invested practically all her little fortune in her house. The small sum which had been saved from that unfortunate investment had been eaten up in the cost of furnishing and maintaining the home. Dr. Hardy, in addition to his good name, had left his daughter some few thousand dollars of life insurance, and this was the capital which was now supplying their daily needs. It, too, would soon be exhausted, and Irene was confronted with the serious business of finding a means of livelihood for herself and her mother.

She discussed her problem with Bert Morrison, with whom she had formed a considerable friendship. She wondered whether she might be able to get a position on one of the newspapers.

"Don't think of it," said Bert. "If you want to keep a sane, sweet outlook on humanity, don't examine it too closely. That's what we have to do in the newspaper game, and that's why we're all cynics. Shakespeare said 'All the world's a stage,' and the same might have been said of the press. The show looks pretty good from the pit, but when you get behind the scenes and see the make-up, and all the strings that are pulled—and who pulls them—well, it makes you suspicious of everything. You no longer accept a surface view; you are always looking for the hidden motive below. Keep out of it."

"But I must earn a living," Irene protested, "and I'm not a stenographer, nor much of anything else. I wasn't brought up to be useful, except with a view to superintending a household—not supporting it."

"Ever contemplate marriage?" said Miss Morrison, with disconcerting frankness.

The colour rose in Irene's cheeks, but she knew that her friend was discussing a serious matter seriously. "Why, yes," she admitted. "I have contemplated it; in fact, I am contemplating it. That's one of the reasons I want to start earning my living. When I marry I want to marry as a matter of choice—not because it's the only way out."

"Now you're talking," said Bert. "And most of us girls who marry as a matter of choice—don't marry. Perhaps I'm too cynical. I suppose there are some men who would make good husbands—if you could find them. But I've seen a few, the rough and the smooth, and I've only known one man from whom a proposal would set me thinking. And he'll never propose to me—not now. Not since Miss Hardy came west."

"Oh," said Irene, slowly. "I'm—I'm so sorry." ...

"It's all right," said Bert, looking out of the window. "Just another of life's little bumps. We get used to them—in time. But you want a job. Let me see; you draw, don't you?"

"Just for pastime. I can't earn a living that way."

"I'm not so sure. Perhaps not with art in the abstract. You must commercialize it. Don't shy at that word. Believe me, all art is pretty well commercialized in these times. Our literary men are writing advertisements instead of poetry and getting more for it. And if you, on the one hand, can make a picture of the Rockies, which you can't sell, and on the other can make a picture of a pair of shoes, which you can sell, which, as a woman of good sense, in need of the simoleons, are you going to do? You're going to draw the shoes—and the pay cheque. Now I think I can get you started that way, on catalogue work and ad. cuts. Try your pencil on something—anything at all—and bring down a few samples."

So Irene's little studio room began to take on a practical purpose. It was work which called for form and proportion rather than colour, and in these Irene excelled. She soon found herself with as much as she could do, in addition to the duties of the household, as maids were luxuries which could no longer be afforded, and her mother seemed unable to realize that they were not still living in the affluence of Dr. Hardy's income. To Irene, therefore, fell the work of the house, as well as its support. But her success in earning a living did not seem in the slightest degree to clear the way for marriage. She could not ask Dave to assume the support of her mother; particularly in view of Mrs. Hardy's behaviour toward him, she could not ask that. She sometimes wondered if Conward— For a long while she refused to complete the thought, but at length, why not? Why shouldn't Conward marry her mother? And what other purpose could he have in his continuous visits to their home? Mrs. Hardy, although no longer young, had by ho means

surrendered all the attractions of her sex, and Conward was slipping by the period where a young girl would be his natural mate. If they should marry—Irene was no plotter, but it did seem that such a match would clear the way for all concerned. She was surprised, when she turned it over in her mind, to realize that Conward had won for himself such a place in her regard that she could contemplate such a consummation as very much to be desired. Subconsciously, rather than from specific motive, she assumed a still more friendly attitude toward him.

Bert Morrison's confession had, however, set up another very insistent train of thought in Irene's mind. She realized that Bert, with all her show of cynicism and masculinity, was really a very womanly young woman, with just the training and the insight into life that would make her almost irresistible should she enter the matrimonial market. And Bert and Dave were already good friends; very good friends indeed, as Irene suspected from fragments of conversation which either of them dropped from time to time. Although she never doubted the singleness of Dave's devotion she sometimes suspected that in Bert Morrison's presence he felt a more frank comradeship than in hers. And it was preposterous that he should not know that Bert might be won for the winning. And meantime....

Another winter wore away; another spring came rushing from the mountain passes; another summer was upon them, and still Irene Hardy had not surrendered. A thousand times she told herself it was impossible, with her mother to think of— And always she ended in indignation over her treatment of Dave. It was outrageous to keep him waiting. And somewhere back of her self-indignation flitted the form—the now seductive form—of Bert Morrison.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Irene Hardy chose to be frank with herself over the situation. She had not doubted the sincerity of her attachment for Dave Elden; but, had she experienced such a doubt, the entry of Bert Morrison into the drama would have forever removed it. Indeed, now that she knew that Dave's suit would be regarded with favour by another woman—an accomplished, clever, experienced woman,—she was very much more eager to monopolize it to herself. And in fairness she admitted that things could not continue as they were. The menace of Bert Morrison was static, so to speak. With fine self-abnegation Bert was standing aside. But how long would she continue to stand aside? Irene was old enough to know that the ramparts of friendship are a poor defence when the artillery of passion is brought to bear; indeed, it is usually through those very ramparts that the assault is effected. And if she continued to trifle with Dave Elden—

Yes, *trifle*. She would be frank. She would not spare herself. She had been trifling with him. Rather than accept the terms which her own attitude had made necessary—rather than tell him with her lips what she felt in her heart—she had trifled away all these months, almost these years.... She would lay her false pride aside. In the purity of her womanhood, which he could not misunderstand, she would divest herself of all convention and tell him frankly that—that—

She was not sure what she would tell, or how she would tell it. She was sure only that she would make him know. At the very next opportunity....

It came on a fine summer's evening in late July, while Dave and Irene drifted in his car over the rich ripening prairies. Everywhere were fields of dark green wheat, already beginning to glimmer with the gold of harvest; everywhere were herds of sleek cattle sighing and blowing contentedly in the cool evening air. Away to the west lay the mountains, blue and soft as a pillow of velvet for the head of the dying day; overhead, inverted islands of brass and copper floated lazily in an inverted sea of azure and opal; up from the southwest came the breath of the far Pacific, mild, and soft, and gentle.

"We started at the wrong end in our nation building," Dave was saying. "We started to build cities, leaving the country to take care of itself. We are finding out how wrong we were. Depend upon it, where there is a prosperous country the cities will take care of themselves. We have been putting the cart before the horse—"

But Irene's eyes were on the sunset; on the slowly fading colours of the cloudlands overhead. Something of that colour played across her fine face, mellowing, softening, drawing as it seemed the very soul to cheeks and lips and eyes. Dave paused in his speech to regard her, and her beauty rushed upon him, engulfed him, overwhelmed him in such a poignancy of tenderness that it seemed for a moment all his resolves must be swept away and he must storm the citadel that would not surrender to siege.... Only action could hold him resolute; he pressed down the accelerator until the steel lungs of his motor were drinking power to their utmost capacity and the car roared furiously down the stretches of the country road.

It was dusk when he had burnt out his violence, and, chastened and spent, he turned the machine to hum back gently to the forgotten city. Irene, by some fine telepathy, had followed vaguely the course of his emotions; had followed them in delicious excitement, and fear, and

hope. She sensed in some subtle feminine way the impulse that had sent him roaring into the distances; she watched his powerful hand on the wheel; his clear, steady eye; the minute accuracy with which he controlled his flying motor; and she prayed—and did not know what or why she prayed. But a colour not all of the dying sunlight lit her cheek as she guessed—she feared—she hoped—that she had prayed that he might forget his fine resolves—that his heart might at last out-rule his head—

In the deepening darkness her fingers found his arm. The motion of the car masked the violence of her trembling, but for a time the pounding of her heart would not allow her speech.

"Dave," she said at length, "I want to tell you that I think you—that we—that I—oh! I've been very selfish and proud—"

Her fingers had followed his arm to the shoulder, and the car had idled to a standstill. "I have fought as long as I can, Dave." She raised her eyes full to his, and felt them glowing upon her in the dusk. "I have fought as long as I can," she said, "and I—I always wanted to—to lose, you know; and now—I surrender." ...

Elden lost no time in facing the unpleasant task of an interview with Mrs. Hardy. It was even less pleasant than he expected.

"Irene is of age," said Mrs. Hardy, bluntly. "If she will she will. But I must tell you plainly that I will do all I can to dissuade her. Ungrateful child!" she exclaimed, in an outburst of temper, "after all these years to throw herself away in an infatuation for a cow *puncher*."

The thorn of Mrs. Hardy's distress, revealed as it was in those last contemptuous words, struck Dave as so ridiculous that he laughed outright. It was the second occasion upon which his sense of humour had suffered an inopportune reaction in her presence.

"Yes, laugh at me," she said, bitterly. "Laugh at her mother, an old woman now, alone in the world—the mother that risked her life for the child you are taking with a laugh—"

"I beg your pardon," said Dave. "I was not laughing at you, but at the very great aversion in which you hold anyone who has at one time followed the profession of a cowboy. As one who was born practically with a lariat in his hand I claim the liberty of being amused at that aversion. I've known many of the cow punching trade, and a good few others, and while the boys are frequently rough they are generally white—a great deal whiter than their critics—and with sounder respect for a good woman than I have found in circles that consider themselves superior. So if you ask me to apologize for the class from which I come I have only a laugh for your answer. But when you say I have taken your child thoughtlessly, there you do me an injustice. And when you speak of being left alone in the world you do both Irene and me an injustice. And when you call yourself an old woman you do us all an injustice—"

"You may spare your compliments," said Mrs. Hardy, tartly. "I have no relish for them. And as for your defence of cow *punchers*, I prefer gentlemen. Why Irene should wish to throw herself away when there are men like Mr. Conward—"

"Conward!" interrupted Dave.

"He has the manners of a gentleman," she said, in a tone intended to be crushing.

"And the morals of a coyote," Dave returned, hotly.

"O-o-o-h," said Mrs. Hardy, in a low, shocked cry. That Elden should speak of Conward with such disdain seemed to her little less than sacrilege. Then, gathering herself together with some dignity, "If you cannot speak respectfully of Mr. Conward you will please leave the house. I shall not forbid you to see Irene; I know that would be useless. But please do not trouble me with your presence."

When Dave had gone Mrs. Hardy, very angry with him, and almost equally angry with herself owing to a vague conviction that she had had if anything the worse of the interview, hurried to the telephone. She rang up Conward's number.

"Oh, Mr. Conward," she said. "You know who is speaking? Yes. You must come up to-night. I do want to talk with you. I—I've been insulted—in my own house. By that—that Elden. It's all very terrible. I can't tell you over the telephone."

Conward called early in the evening. Irene met him at the door. He greeted her even more cordially than usual, dropping into that soft, confidential note which he had found so potent in capturing such affections as his heart, in a somewhat varied experience, had desired. But there was no time for conversation. Mrs. Hardy had heard the bell, and bustled into the room. She had not yet recovered from her agitation, and made no effort to conceal it.

"Come into my sitting-room, Mr. Conward. I am so glad you have come. Really, I am so upset. It is such a comfort to have some one you can depend on—some one whose advice one can seek,

on occasions like this. I never thought—"

Mrs. Hardy had been fingering her handkerchief, which she now pressed to her eyes. Conward laid a soothing hand on her shoulder. "There, there," he said. "You must control yourself. Tell me. It will relieve you, and perhaps I can help."

"Oh, I'm sure you can," she returned. "It's all over Irene and that—that—I *will* say it—that cow *puncher*. To think it would have come to this! Mr. Conward, you are not a mother, so you can't understand. Ungrateful girl! But I blame *him*. And the Doctor. I never wanted him to come west. It was that fool trip, in that fool motor—"

Conward smiled to himself over her unaccustomed violence. Mrs. Hardy must be deeply moved when she forgot to be correct. He had readily surmised the occasion of her distress. It needed no words from Mrs. Hardy to tell him that Irene and Dave were engaged. He had expected it for some time, and the information was not altogether distasteful to him. He had come somewhat under the spell of Irene's attractiveness, but he had no deep attachment for her. He was not aware that he had ever had an abiding attachment for any woman. Attachments were things which he put on and off as readily as a change of clothes. He planned to hit Dave through Irene, but he planned that when he struck it should be a death blow. Their engagement would lend a sharper edge to his shaft.

It may as well be set down that for Mrs. Hardy Conward had no regard whatever. Even while he shaped soft words for her ear he held her in contempt. To him she was merely a silly old woman. From the day he had first seen Mrs. Hardy his attitude toward her had been one of subtle flattery; partly because it pleased his whim, and partly because on that same day he had seen Irene, and he was shrewd enough to know that his approach to the girl's affections must be made by way of the acquaintanceship which he would establish under the guise of friendship for her mother. Since his trouble with Dave, Conward had a double purpose in developing that acquaintanceship. He had no compunctions as to his method of attack. While Dave was manfully laying siege to the front gate, Conward proposed to burglarize the home through the back door of family intimacy. And now that Dave seemed to have won the prize, Conward realized that his own position was more secure than ever. Had he not been called in consultation by the girl's mother? Were not the inner affairs of the family now laid open before him? Did not his position as her mother's advisor permit him to assume toward Irene an attitude which, in a sense, was more intimate than even Dave's could be? He turned these matters over quickly in his mind, and congratulated himself upon the wisdom of his tactics.

"It's very dreadful," Mrs. Hardy was saying, between dabbings of her perfumed handkerchief on eyes that bore witness to the genuineness of her distress. "Irene is not an ordinary girl. She has in her qualities that justified me in hoping that—that she would do—very differently from this. You have been a good friend, Mr. Conward. Need I conceal from you, Mr. Conward, from you, of all men, what have been my hopes for Irene?"

Conward's heart leapt at the confession. He had secretly entertained some doubt as to Mrs. Hardy's purpose in opening her home to him as she had done; absurd as the hypothesis seemed, still there was the hypothesis that Mrs. Hardy saw in Conward a possible comfort to her declining days. He had no doubt that her vanity was equal to that supposition, but he had done her less than justice in supposing that she had had any directly personal ambitions. Her ambitions were for Irene. From her point of view it seemed to Mrs. Hardy that almost anything would be better than that Irene should marry a man who had sprung from the low estate which Elden not only confessed, but boasted. She had hoped that by bringing Conward into the house, by bringing Irene under the influence of a close family acquaintanceship with him, that that young lady might be led to see the folly of the road she was choosing. But now her clever purpose had come to nought, and in her vexation she did not hesitate to humble herself before Conward by confessing, in words that he could not misunderstand, that she had hoped that he would be the successful suitor for Irene. And Conward's heart leapt at the confession. He was sufficiently schooled in the affairs of life to appreciate the advantage of open alliance with Mrs. Hardy in the short, sharp battle that lay before him.

"And I suppose I need not conceal from you," he answered, "what my hopes have been. Those hopes have grown as my acquaintance with you has grown. It is reasonably safe to judge a daughter by her mother, and by that standard Irene is one of the most adorable of young women."

"I *have* been called attractive in my day," confessed Mrs. Hardy, warming at once to his flattery.

"Have been?" said Conward. "Say rather you are. If I had not been rendered, perhaps, a little partial by my admiration of Irene, I—well, one can scarcely give his heart in two places, you know. And my deep regard for you, Mrs. Hardy—my desire that you shall be spared this—ah—threatened humiliation, will justify me in using heroic measures to bring this unfortunate affair to a close. You may trust me, Mrs. Hardy."

"I was sure of that," she returned, already much comforted. "I was sure of your sympathy, and that you would find a way."

"I shall need your co-operation," he warned her. "Irene is—you will forgive me, Mrs. Hardy, but Irene is, if I may say it, somewhat headstrong. She is—"

"She is her father over again," Mrs. Hardy interrupted. "I told him he should not attempt that crazy trip of his without me along, but he would go. And this is what he has brought upon me, and he not here to share it." Mrs. Hardy's tone conveyed very plainly her grievance over the doctor's behaviour in evading the consequences of the situation which his headstrong folly had created.

"She is set in her own mind," Conward continued. "We must not openly oppose her. You must appear to be resigned, even to the extent of treating Elden with such consideration as you can. To argue with Irene, to attempt to persuade her, or to order Elden off the place, would only deepen their attachment. Lovers are that way, Mrs. Hardy. We must adopt other tactics."

"You are very clever," said Mrs. Hardy. "You have been a student of human nature."

Conward smiled pleasantly. Little as he valued Mrs. Hardy's opinion, her words of praise fell very gratefully upon him. Flatterers are seldom proof against their own poison. "Yes, I have studied human nature," he admitted. "The most interesting—and the most profitable—of all studies. And I know that young couples in love are not governed by the ordinary laws of reason. That is why it is useless to argue with Irene—sensible girl though she is—on a subject like this. We must reach her some other way.

"The way that occurs to me is to create distrust. Love is either absurdly trustful or absurdly suspicious. There is no middle course, no balanced judgment. Everything is in extremes. Everything is seen through a magnifying lens, or missed altogether. In the trustfulness of love little virtues are magnified to angelic qualities, and vices are quite unseen. But change that trust to suspicion, and a hidden, sinister meaning is found behind the simplest word or act."

Conward had risen and was walking about the room. He was conscious of being regarded as a man of very deep insight, and the consciousness pleased him.

"We must cause Irene to distrust Elden—to see him in his true light," he continued. "That may be possible. But if it should fail we must take another course, which I hesitate to mention to you, but which may be necessary if we are to save her from this fatal infatuation. If our efforts to cause Irene to see Elden in his true light were to fail, and she were to discover those efforts, she would be more set in his favour than ever. So we must plan two campaigns; one, which I have already suggested, and one, if that should fail, to cause Elden to distrust Irene. No, no," he said, raising his hand toward Mrs. Hardy, who had started from her seat,— "there must be no vestige of reason, except that the end justifies the means. It is a case of saving Irene, even if we must pain her—and you—in the saving."

"It's very dreadful," Mrs. Hardy repeated. "But you are very thorough; you leave nothing to chance. I suppose that is the way with all big business men."

"You can trust me," Conward assured her. "There is no time to be lost, and I must plan my campaigns at once."

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Conward paused to speak to Irene before leaving the house.

"I owe you my good wishes," he said. "And I give them most frankly, although, perhaps, with more difficulty than you suppose."

"You are very good, Mr. Conward," she acknowledged.

"I could not wish you anything but happiness," he returned. "And had I been so fortunate as Elden, in making your acquaintance first, I might have hoped to contribute to your happiness more directly than I can under the present circumstances." He was speaking in his low, sedulous notes, and his words sent the girl's blood rushing in a strange mixture of gratification and anger. The tribute he implied—that he himself would have been glad to have been her suitor—was skilfully planned to appeal to her vanity, and her anger was due to its success. She told herself she should not listen to such words; she should hate to hear such words. And yet she listened to them, and was not sure that she hated them. She could only say, "You are very good, Mr. Conward."

He pressed her hand at the door, and again that strange mixture of emotions surged through her.

Conward proceeded to the business section of the town, well pleased with the evening's

events. He found his way impeded by crowds in front of the newspaper offices. He had paid little attention to the progress of the war scare, attributing it to the skilful publicity of interests connected with the manufacture of armaments. To the last he had not believed that war was possible. "Nobody wants to fight," he had assured his business acquaintances. "Even the armament people don't want to fight. All they want is to frighten more money out of the taxpayers of Europe." To Conward this explanation seemed very complete. It covered the whole ground and left nothing to be said.

But to-night he was aware of a keener tension in the crowd atmosphere. They were good natured crowds, to be sure; laughing, and cheering, and making sallies of heavy wit; but they were in some way more intense than he had ever seen before. There was no fear of war; there was, rather, an adventurous spirit which seemed to fear that the affair would blow over, as had so many affairs in the past, and all the excitement go for nothing. That war, if it came to war, could last, no one dreamed; it would be a matter of a few weeks, a few months, at the most, until a thoroughly whipped Germany would retire behind the Rhine to plan ways of raising the indemnity which outraged civilization would demand. Conward elbowed his way through the crowds, smiling, in his superior knowledge, over their excitement. Newspapers must have headlines.

At his office he used a telephone. Then he walked to a restaurant, where, after a few minutes, he was joined by a young woman. They took a table in a box. Supper was disposed of, and the young woman began to grow impatient.

"Well, you brought me here," she said at last. "You've fed me, and you don't feed anybody, Conward, without a purpose. What's the consideration?"

"Yes, I have a purpose," he admitted. "I'm pulling off a little joke, and I want you to help me."

"You're some joker," she returned. "Who have you got it in for?"

"You know Elden—Dave Elden?"

"Sure. I've known him ever since that jolt put him out of business up in your rooms, ever so many years ago. He was too rural for that mixture. Still, Elden has lots of friends—decent friends, I mean."

"I'm rather sorry you know him," said Conward. "But—what's more to the point—does he know you?"

"Not he. I guess he had no memory the next morning, and would have made a point of forgetting me, even if he had."

"That's all right, then. Now I want you to get him down to your place some night to be agreed upon—I'll fix the date later—and keep him there until I call for him, with his *fiancée*."

"Some joke," she said, and there was disgust in her voice. "Who is it on: Elden, me, or the girl?"

"Never mind who it's on," Conward returned. "I'm paying for it. Here's something on account, and if you make a good job of it, I won't be stingy."

He handed her a bill, which she kissed and put in her purse. "I need the money, Conward, or I wouldn't take it. Say, don't you know you're wasting your time in this one-horse town? You ought to get into the big league. Your jokes would sure make a hit."

This part of his trap set, Conward awaited a suitable opportunity to spring it. In the meantime he took Mrs. Hardy partially into his confidence. He allowed her to believe, however, that Elden's habits would stand correction, and he had merely arranged to trap him in one of his favorite haunts. She was very much shocked, and thought it was very dreadful, but of course we must save Irene. Mr. Conward was very clever. That's what came of being a man of experience,—and judgment, Mr. Conward, and some knowledge of the world.

But concerning another part of his programme Conward was even less frank with Mrs. Hardy. He was clever enough to know that he must observe certain limitations.

At length all his plans appeared to be complete. The city was in a tumult of excitement over the war, but for Conward a deeper interest centred in the plot he was hatching under the unsuspecting noses of Irene and Elden. If he could trap Dave the rest would be easy. If he failed in this he had another plan to give failure at least the appearance of success. The fact that the nation was now at war probably had an influence in speeding up the plot. Everything was under high tension; powerful currents of thought were bearing the masses along unaccustomed channels; society itself was in a state of flux. If he were to strike at all let the blow fall at once.

On this early August night he ascertained that Dave was working alone in his office. Then he called a number on a telephone.

"This is the night," he explained. "You will find him alone in his office. I will be waiting to

hear from you at——"—he quoted Mrs. Hardy's telephone number. Then he drove his car to the Hardy home, exchanged a few words with Irene, and sat down to a hand of cribbage with her mother.

Poring over his correspondence, Dave tried to abstract his mind from the tumultuous doings of these last days. Office organization had been paralyzed; stenographers and clerks were incapable with excitement. It was as though some great excursion had been announced; something wonderful and novel, which divorced the interest from the dull routine of business. And Dave, with his ear cocked for the cry of the latest extra, spent the evening hours in a valiant effort at concentration.

Suddenly he heard a knock at the door; not a business man's knock; not an office girl's knock; a hesitating, timid, apologetic knock.

"Come in," he called. No one entered, but presently he heard the knock again. He arose and walked to the door. Outside stood a young woman. She looked up shyly, her face half concealed beneath a broad hat.

"If you please," she said, "excuse me, but—you are Mr. Elden, aren't you?"

"Yes; can I help you in any way?"

The woman tittered a moment, but resumed soberly, "You will wonder at me coming to you, but I'm from the country. Did you think that?"

"I suspected it," said Dave, with a smile. "You knocked——" He paused.

"Yes?"

"Like a country girl," he said, boldly.

She tittered again. "Well, I'm lost," she confessed. "I got off the train a short time ago. My aunt was to meet me, but there are such crowds in the street—I must have missed her. And I saw your name on the window, and I had heard of you. So I just thought I'd ask—if you wouldn't mind—showing me to this address."

She fumbled in her pocket, and Dave invited her into the office. There she produced a torn piece of paper with an address.

"Why, that's just a few blocks," said Dave. "I'll walk around with you." He turned for his hat, but at that moment there was another timid knock on the door. He opened it. A boy of eight or ten years stood outside.

"Can I come in?" the lad ventured.

"Why, of course you can. What is it, son?"

"Are you Mr. Elden?"

"Yes."

The lad looked shyly about the office. It was evident he was impressed with its magnificence. Suddenly he pulled off his hat, disclosing a shock of brown hair.

"Are you Mr. Elden that sells lots?"

"Yes. Or, rather, I *did* sell lots, but not many of late. Were you thinking of buying a few lots?"

"Did you sell lots to my father?"

"Well, if I knew your father's name perhaps I could tell you. Who is your father?"

"He's Mr. Merton. I'm his son. And he said to me, before he got so bad, he said, 'There's just one honest man in this city, and that's Mr. Elden.' Is that you, Mr. Elden?"

"Well, I hope it is, but I won't claim such a distinction. I remember your father very well. Did he send you to me?"

"No sir. He's too sick. He don't know anybody now. He didn't know me to-night." The boy's voice went thick, and he stopped and swallowed. "And then I remembered what he said about you, and I just came. Was that all right, Mr. Elden?"

"You say your father is very sick?"

"He don't know anybody."

"Have you help—a doctor—a nurse?"

"No sir. We haven't any money. My father spent it all for the lots that he bought from you."

Dave winced. Then, turning to the young woman, "I'm afraid this is a more urgent case than yours. I'll call a taxi to take you to your address."

To his surprise his visitor broke out in a ribald laugh. She had seated herself on a desk, and was swinging one foot jauntily.

"It's all off," she said. "Say, Dave, you couldn't lose me in this burg. You don't remember me, do you? Well, all the better. I'm rather glad I broke down on this job. I used to be something of an actress, and I'd have put it over if it hadn't been for the kid. The fact is, Dave," she continued, "I was sent up here to decoy you. It wasn't fair fighting, and I didn't like it, but money has been mighty slow of late. I wonder—how much you'd give to know who sent me?"

Dave pulled some bills from his pocket and held them before her. She took them from his hand.

"Conward," she said.

Dave's blood went to his head. "The scoundrel!" he cried. "The low down dog! There's more in this than appears on the surface."

"Sure there is," she said. "There's another woman. There always is."

Elden walked to his desk. From a drawer he took a revolver; toyed with it a moment in his hands; broke it open, crammed it full of cartridges and thrust it in his pocket.

The girl watched him with friendly interest. "Believe me, Dave," she said, "if Conward turns up missing I won't know a thing—not a d— thing."

For a moment he stood irresolute. He could only guess what Conward's plan had been, but that it had been diabolical and cowardly, and that it concerned Irene, he had no doubt. His impulse was to immediately confront Conward, force a confession, and deal with him as the occasion might seem to require. But his eye fell on the boy, with his shock of brown hair and wistful, half-frightened face.

"I'll go with you first," he said, with quick decision. Then to the girl, "Sorry I must turn you out, but this case is urgent."

"That's all right," she said. Suddenly there was a little catch in her voice. "I'm used to being turned out."

He shot a sharp glance at her. Her face was laughing. "You're too decent for your job," he said, abruptly.

"Thanks, Dave," she answered, and he saw her eyes glisten. "That helps—some." And before he knew it she was into the street.

"All right, son," said Dave, taking up the matter now in hand. "What's your name—your first name?"

"Charlie."

"And your address?"

The boy mentioned a distant subdivision.

"That *is* out, isn't it? Well, we'll take the car. We'll run right out and see what is to be done. I guess I'd better call a doctor at once."

He went to the telephone and gave some directions. Then he and the boy walked to a garage, and in a few moments were humming along the by-streets into the country. Dave had already become engrossed in his errand of mercy, and his rage at Conward, if not forgotten, was temporarily dismissed from his mind. He chatted with the boy as he drove.

"You go to school?"

"Not this year. Father has been too sick. Of course, this is holidays, and he says he'll be all right before they're over."

Dave smiled grimly. "The incurable optimism of it," he murmured to himself. Then outwardly, "Of course he will. We'll fix him up in no time with a good doctor and a good nurse."

They drove on through the calm night, leaving the city streets behind and following what was little more than a country trail. This was crossed in every direction, and at every possible angle, by just such other country trails, unravelling themselves into the darkness. Here and there they bumped over pieces of graded street, infinitely rougher than the natural prairie; once Dave dropped his front wheels into a collapsing water trench; once he just grazed an isolated hydrant. The city lights were cut off by a shoulder of foothill; only their dull glow hung in the distant sky.

"And this is one of our 'choice residential subdivisions,'" said Dave to himself, as with Charlie's guidance and his own in-born sense of location he threaded his way through the maze of diverging trails. "Fine business; fine business."

As the journey continued the sense of self-reproach which had been static in him for many months became more insistent, and he found himself repeating the ironical phrase, "Fine business, fine business. Yes, I let Conward 'weigh the coal' all right." The intrusion of Conward into his mind sent the blood to his head, but at that moment his reflections were cut short by the boy.

"We will have to get out here," he said. "The bridge is down."

Investigation proved him to be right. A bridge over a small stream had collapsed, and was slowly disintegrating amid its own wreckage. Dave explored the stream bottom, getting muddy boots for his pains. Then he ran the car a little to one side of the road, locked the switch, and walked on with the boy.

"Pretty lonely out here, isn't it?" he ventured.

"Oh, no. There is a street light we can see in a little while; it is behind the hill now. We see it from the corner of our shack. It's very cheery."

"Fine business," Dave repeated to himself. "And this is how our big success was made. Well, the 'success' has vanished as quickly as it came. I suppose there is a Law somewhere that is not mocked."

They were passing through a settlement of crude houses, dimly visible in the starlight and by occasional yellow blurs from their windows. Before one of the meanest of these the boy at last stopped. The upper hinge of the door was broken, and a feeble light struggled through the space where it gaped outward. Charlie pulled the door open, and Dave entered. At first his eyes could not take in the dim outlines before him; he was conscious of a very small and stuffy room, with a peculiar odour which he attributed to an oil lamp burning on a box. He walked over and turned the lamp up, but the oil was consumed; a red, sullen, smoking wick was its only response. Then he felt in his pocket, and struck a match.

The light revealed the dinginess of the little room. There was a bed, covered with musty, ragged clothing; a table, littered with broken and dirty dishes and pieces of stale food; a stove, cracked and greasy, and one or two bare boxes serving as articles of furniture. But it was to the bed Dave turned, and, with another match, bent over the shrunken form that lay almost concealed amid the coarse coverings. He brought his face down close, then straightened up and steadied himself for a moment.

"He'll soon be well, don't you think, Mister? He said he would be well when the holidays——" But Dave's expression stopped the boy, whose own face went suddenly wild with fear.

"He is well now, Charlie," he said, as steadily as he could. "It is all holidays now for him."

The match had burnt out, and the room was in utter darkness. Dave heard the child drawing his feet slowly across the floor, then suddenly whimpering like a thing that had been mortally hurt. He groped toward him, and at length his fingers found his shock of hair. He drew the boy slowly into his arms; then very, very tight.... After all, they were orphans together.

"You will come with me," he said, at length. "I will see that you are provided for. The doctor will soon be here, or we will meet him on the way, and he will make the arrangements for—the arrangements that have to be made, you know."

They retraced their steps toward the town, meeting the doctor at the broken bridge. Dave exchanged a few words with him in low tones, and they passed on. Soon they were swinging again through the city streets, this time through the busy thoroughfares, which were almost blocked with tense, excited crowds about the bulletin boards. Even with the developments of the evening pressing heavily upon his mind, Dave could not resist the temptation to stop and listen for a moment to bulletins being read through a megaphone.

"The Kaiser has stripped off his British regalia," said the announcer. "He says he will never again wear a British uniform."

A chuckle of derisive laughter ran through the mob; then some one struck up a well-known refrain,—"What the hell do we care?" Up and down the street voices caught up the chorus.... Within a year the bones of many in that thoughtless crowd, bleaching on the fields of Flanders, showed how much they cared.

Dave literally pressed his machine through the throng, which opened slowly to let it pass, and immediately filled up the wake behind. Then he drove direct to the Hardy home.

After some delay Irene met him at the door, and Dave explained the situation in a few words. "We must take care of him, Reenie," he said. "I feel a personal responsibility."

"Of course we will take him," she answered. "He will live here until we have a—some place of our own." Her face was bright with something which must be tenderness. "Bring him upstairs. We will allot him a room, and introduce him, first, to—the bath-room. And tomorrow we shall have an excursion down town, and some new clothes for Charlie—Elden."

As they moved up the stairs Conward, who had been in another room in conversation with Mrs. Hardy, followed them unseen. The evening had been interminable for Conward. For three hours he had waited word that his victim had been trapped, and for three hours no word had come. He had smoked numberless cigarettes, and nibbled impatiently at his nails, and tried to appear at ease before Mrs. Hardy. If his plans had miscarried; if Dave had discovered the plot; well— And here at length was Dave, engrossed in a very different matter. Conward followed them up the stairs.

Irene and Dave chatted with the boy for a few moments, trying to make him feel at home in his strange surroundings; then Irene turned to some arrangements for his comfort, and Dave started down stairs. In the passage he was met by Conward. Conward seemed at last to have dropped the mask; he leered insolently, triumphantly, in Dave's face.

"What are you doing here?" Dave demanded, as he felt his head beginning to swim in anger.

Conward leered only the more offensively, and walked down the stairs beside him. At the foot he coolly lit another cigarette. If he was conscious of the hate in Dave's eyes he hid his emotions under a mask of insolence. He held the match before him and calmly watched it burn out. Then he extended it toward Dave.

"You remember our wager, Elden. I present you with—a burnt-out match."

"You liar!" cried Dave. "You infamous liar!"

"Ask *her*," Conward replied. "She will deny it, of course. All women do."

Dave felt his muscles tighten, and knew that in a moment he would tear his victim to pieces. As his clenched fist came to the side of his body it struck something hard. His revolver! He had forgotten; he was not in the habit of carrying it. In an instant he had Conward covered.

Dave did not press the trigger at once. He took a fierce delight in torturing the man who had wrecked his life,—even while he told himself he could not believe his boast. Now he watched the colour fade from Conward's cheek; the eyes stand out in his face; the livid blotches more livid still; the cigarette drop from his nerveless lips.

"You are a brave man, Conward," he said, and there was the rasp of hate and contempt in his voice. "You are a very brave man."

Mrs. Hardy, sensing something wrong, came out from her sitting-room. With a little cry she swooned away.

Conward tried to speak, but words stuck in his throat. With a dry tongue he licked his drier lips.

"Do you believe in hell, Conward?" Dave continued. "I've always had some doubt myself, but in thirty seconds—*you'll know*."

Irene, attracted by her mother's cry, appeared on the stairway. For a moment her eyes refused to grasp the scene before them; Conward cowering, terror-stricken; Dave fierce, steely, implacable, with his revolver lined on Conward's brain. Through some strange whim of her mind her thought in that instant flew back to the bottles on the posts of the Elden ranch, and Dave breaking five out of six on the gallop. Then, suddenly, she became aware of one thing only. A tragedy was being enacted before her eyes, and Dave would be held responsible. In a moment every impulse within her beat forth in a wild frenzy to save him from such a consequence.

"Oh, don't, Dave, don't, don't shoot him," she cried, flying down the remaining steps. Before Dave could grasp her purpose she was upon him; had clutched his revolver; had wrapped her arms about his. "Don't, don't, Dave," she pleaded. "For my sake, don't do—*that*."

Her words were tragically unfortunate. For a moment Dave stood as one paralyzed; then his heart dried up within him.

"So that's the way of it," he said, as he broke her grip, and the horror in his own eyes would not let him read the sudden horror in hers. "All right; take it," and he placed the revolver in her hand. "You should know what to do with it." And before she could stop him he had walked out of the house.

She rushed to the gate, but already the roar of his motor was lost in the hum of the city's traffic.

CHAPTER TWENTY

When Dave sprang into his car he gave the motor a full head and drove through the city streets in a fury of recklessness. His mind was numbed; it was incapable of assorting thoughts and placing them in proper relationship to each other. His muscles guided the machine apparently without any mental impulse. He rode it as he had ridden unbroken bronchos in his far-away boyhood. Only this difference; then he had no sense of danger; now he knew the danger, and defied it. If he killed himself, so much the better; if he killed others, so much the better still. The world was a place without purpose; a chaos of blind, impotent, struggling creatures, who struggled only because they did not know they were blind and impotent. Life was a farce and death a big bluff set up that men might take the farce seriously.

He was soon out of the city, roaring through the still Autumn night with undiminished speed. Over tortuous country roads, across sudden bridges, along slippery hillsides, through black bluffs of scrub-land—in some strange way he tried to drown the uproar in his soul in the frenzy of the steel that quivered beneath him. On and on, into the night. Bright stars gleamed overhead; a soft breeze pressed against his face; it was such a night as he had driven, a year ago, with Bert Morrison. Was that only a year ago? And what had happened? Where had he been? Oh, to bring the boy—Charlie, the boy. When was that? Under the calm heaven his mind was already attempting to establish a sequence; to set its outraged home again in order.

Suddenly the car skidded on a slippery hillside, turned from the road, plowed through a clump of scrub, ricocheted against a dark obstruction, poised a moment on two wheels, turned around and stopped. The shock brought Dave to his senses; he got out and walked about the car, feeling the tires with his hands in the darkness. He could appraise no serious damage. Then he sat on the running board and stared for a long while into the darkness. "No use being a damned fool, anyway, Dave," he said to himself, at length. "I got it—where I didn't expect it—but I guess that's the way with every one. The troubles we expect, don't happen, and then the trouble that we didn't expect gets us when we're not watching." He tried to philosophize; to get a fresh grip on himself. "Where are we, anyway?" he continued. "This country looks familiar." He got up again and walked about, finding his way back to the road. He went along it a little way. Vague impressions suggested that he should know the spot, and yet he could not identify it. Listen! There was a sound of water. There was a sighing of the wind in trees; a very low sighing, rather a whispering, of a gentle wind in trees. The place seemed alive with spirits; spirits tapping on the door of some long sealed chamber of his memory.

Then, with a sudden shock, it came to him. It was the hillside on which Dr. Hardy had come to grief; the hillside on which he had first seen her bright face, her wonderful eyes— A poignancy of grief engulfed him, sweeping away his cheap philosophies. Here she stood, young and clean and entrancing, thrust before him in an instant out of the wonderful days of the past. And would she always follow him thus; would she stand at every road corner, every street corner, on every prairie hill, in every office hour; must he catch her fragrance in every breeze; see the glint of her hair in every sunbeam; meet her eyes for ever—soft eyes now veiled in tears and flashing glimpses of what might have been? With an unutterable sinking he knew that that was so; that the world was not big enough to hide him from Irene Hardy. There was no way out.

He started his motor and, even in his despair, felt a thrill of pride as the faithful gears engaged, and the car climbed back to its place on the trail. Was all faithfulness, then, in things of steel and iron, and none in flesh and blood? He followed the trail. Why stop now? The long-forgotten ranch buildings lay across the stream and behind the tongue of spruce trees, unless some wandering foothill fire had destroyed them. He forded the stream without difficulty. That was where he had carried her out.... He felt his way slowly along the old fence. That was where she had set up bottles for his marksmanship.... He stopped where the straggling gate should be, and walked carefully into the yard. That was where she had first called him Dave.... Then he found the doorstep, and sat down to wait.

When the sun was well up he rose and walked about. His lips were parched; he found himself nibbling them with his teeth, so he went to the stream. He was thirsty, but he drank only a mouthful; the water was flat and insipid.... The old cabin was in better repair than he would have thought. He sprung the door open. It was musty and strung with cobwebs; that was the room she had occupied. He did not go in, but sat down and tried to think.

Later he walked up the canyon. He must have walked swiftly, for the sun was not yet at the meridian when he found himself at the little nook in the rock where he and Irene had sat that afternoon when they had first laid their hearts open to each other. He tried to recall that long-forgotten conversation, lacerating himself with the pain of its tenderness. Suddenly one remark stood up in his memory. "The day is coming," she had said, "when our country will want men who can shoot and ride." And he had said, "Well, when it does, it can call on me." And to-day the country did want men who could shoot and ride, and he had flown into the foothills to nurse a broken heart.... Broken hearts can fight as well as whole ones. Better, perhaps, because they don't care. He felt his frame straighten as this thought sank home. He could be of some use yet. At any rate, there was a way out.

Some whim led him through the grove of spruce trees on his way back to the ranch. Here, in an open space, he looked about, kicking in the dry grass. At length his toe disturbed a few bleached bones, and he stood and looked with unseeing eyes far across the shimmering valley.

"Brownie," he said at length. "Brownie." The whole scene came back upon him; the moonlight, and Irene's distress, and the little bleeding body. And he had said he didn't know anything about the justice of God; all he knew was the crittur that couldn't run was the one that got caught.... And he had said that was life.... He had said it was only nature.

And then they had stood among the trees and beneath the white moon and pledged their faith....

Again his head went up, and the old light flashed in his eyes. "The first thing is to kill the wolf," he said aloud. "No other innocent shall fall to his fangs. Then—my country."

Darkness had again fallen before Dave found his car threading the streets of the city, still feverish with its new-born excitement of war. He returned his car to the garage; an attendant looked up curiously,—it was evident from his glance that Dave had already been missed—but no words were exchanged. He stood for a moment in the street collecting his thoughts and rehearsing his resolves. He was amazed to find that, even in his bitterness, the city reached a thousand hands to him—hands of habit, and association, and custom of mind—all urging him back into the old groove; all saying, "The routine is the thing; be a spoke in the wheel; go 'round with the rest of us."

"No," he reminded himself. "No, I can't do that. I have business on hand. First—to kill the wolf."

He remembered that he had given his revolver to Irene. And suddenly she sat with him again at the tea table.... Where was he? Yes, he had given his revolver to Irene. Well, there was another in his rooms. First to kill the wolf.

In the hallway of the block in which he had his bachelor apartments Dave almost collided with a woman. He drew back, and the light fell on his face, but hers was in the shadow. And then he heard her voice. "Oh, Dave, I'm so glad—why, what has happened?" The last words ran into a little treble of pain as she noted his haggard face; he had not eaten for twenty-four hours, nor slept for thirty-six.

"You—Edith," he managed to say. "Whatever—"

She came toward him and placed her hands on his. "I've been here a hundred times—ever since morning—ever since Bert Morrison called up to say you had disappeared—that there was some mystery. There isn't, is there, Dave? You're all right, Dave, aren't you, Dave?"

"I guess I'm all right," he managed to answer, "but I got a job on—an important job on. I must get it done. There is not time—"

But her woman's intuition had gone far below his idle words. "There is something wrong, Dave," she said. "You never looked like this before. Tell me what it is. Tell me, Dave; not that I want to know, for knowing's sake, but just that I—perhaps I—can help."

Dave was silent for a moment, watching her. She had changed her position, and he could see her face. Suddenly it occurred to him that Edith Duncan was beautiful. If she had not quite the fine features of Irene, she had a certain softness of expression, a certain mellowness, even tenderness, of lip and eye; a certain womanly delicacy—

"Edith," he said, "you're white. Why is it that the woman a man loves will fail him, and the woman he only likes—stays true?"

"Oh!" she cried, and he could not guess the depths from which her cry was wrung.... "I should not have asked you, Dave," she said. "I'm sorry."

They stood a moment, neither wishing to move away. "You said you had something must be done at once," she reminded him at length.

"Yes," he answered. "I have to kill a man. Then I'm going to join up with the army."

Her hands were again upon him. "But you mustn't, Dave," she pleaded. "No matter—no matter *what*—you mustn't do that. That is the one thing you must not do."

"Edith, you are not a man. You don't understand. That is the one thing I must do."

"But you can't fight for your country, then. You will only increase its troubles in these troubled times. Don't think I'm pleading for *him*, Dave, but for you, for the sake of us—for the sake of those—who care."

He took her hands in his and raised them to his shoulders and drew her face close to his. Then, speaking very slowly, and with each word by itself, "Do you really care?" he said.

"Oh, Dave!"

"Then come to my room and talk to me. Talk to me! Talk to me! For God's sake talk to me. I must talk to some one."

She followed him. Inside the room he had himself under control again. The street lights flooded through the windows, so he did not press the switch. He motioned her to a chair.

And then he told her the story, all he knew.

When he had finished she arose and walked to one of the windows and stood looking with unseeing eyes upon the street. For the second time in his life Dave Elden had laid his heart bare to her, and again after all these years he still talked as friend to friend. That was it. She was under no delusion. Dave's eyes were as blind to her love as they had been that night when he had first told her of Irene Hardy. And she could not tell him. Most of all, she could not tell him now.... Yes, she was very sure of that. If she should tell him now—if she should let him know—he would turn to her in his grief. He would be clay in her hands. And afterwards he would despise her for having taken advantage of his hour of weakness. She had waited all these years, and still she must wait.

Dave's eyes were upon her form, silhouetted against the window. It occurred to him that in form Edith was very much like Irene. He recalled that in those dead past days when they used to ride together Edith had reminded him of Irene. When she stood silent so long he spoke again.

"I'm afraid I haven't played a very heroic part," he said, somewhat shamefacedly. "I should have buried my secret in my heart; buried it even from you; perhaps most of all from you. I should have faced the world with a smile, as one who rises above the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune. People do that kind of thing in books; perhaps some do in real life. I suppose you can't tell from the outside what may be carried within—even by your closest friend. But—you can advise me, Edith. I will value whatever you say."

She trembled until she thought he must see her, and she feared to trust her voice, but she could delay a reply no longer.

"You are right, Dave," she said at length. "You never can tell what other people are carrying; perhaps, even, as you say, your closest friends. The first thing is to get rid of the idea that your experience is unique; that your lot is harder than that of other people. It may be different, but it is not harder. When you get that point of view you will be able to pass sane judgments."

"And when you can pass sane judgment you may see that the evidence is not, even at the worst, very conclusive. Why should you take Conward's word in such a matter as this?"

"I didn't take Conward's word. That's why I didn't kill him at once. It wasn't his word—it was the insult—that cut. But she tried to save him. She threw herself upon me. She would have taken the bullet herself rather than let it find him. That was what—that was what—"

"I know, Dave." She had to hold herself in check lest the tenderness that welled within her, and would shape words of endearing sympathy in her mind, should find utterance in speech. "I know, Dave," she said. "The next thing then is to make sure in your own mind whether you ever really loved Irene Hardy."

He sprang to his feet. "Loved Irene!" he exclaimed, and she was in a turmoil of fear and hope that he would approach her. But he paced his own side of the room.

"Edith," he said, "there is no way of explaining this. You can't understand. I know you have given yourself up to a life of service, and I honour you very much, and all that, but there are some things you won't be able to understand. You can't understand just how much I loved Irene."

"I think I can," she answered, quietly. "You have kept your love faithful and single for a dozen years, and I—I think I can understand. But that isn't why I asked. Because if you loved Irene a week ago you love her to-night."

"Have you never known of love being turned to hate?"

"No. Other impulses may be, but not love. Love can no more turn to hate than sunlight can turn to darkness. Believe me, Dave, if you hate Irene now you never loved her. Listen:

"Love beareth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things, *endureth* all things!"

"Not all things, Edith; not all things."

"It says *all* things."

Dave was silent for some time. When he spoke again she caught a different sound in his voice; a tone as though his soul in those few moments had gone through a life-time of experience.

"Edith," he said, "when you repeated those words I knew you had something that I have not. I knew it, not by the words, but by the way you said them. You made me feel that you were not

setting a higher standard for me than you would accept for yourself. You made me *know* that in your own life, if you loved, you would be ready to endure all things. Tell me, Edith, how may this thing be done?"

She trembled with delight at the new tone in his voice, for she knew that in that hour Dave had crossed a boundary of his life and entered into a new and richer field of existence. She knew that for him life would never again be the empty, flippant, selfish, irresponsible thing which in the past he had called life. He was already beginning to taste of that wine of compensation provided for those who pass through the valley of sorrow.

"In your case," she said, "the course is simple. It is just a case of forgiving."

He gazed for a time into the street, while thoughts of bitterness and revenge fought for domination of his mind. "Edith," he said at length, "must I—forgive?"

"I do not say you must," she answered. "I merely say if you are wise you will. Forgiveness is the balm of our moral life, by which we keep the wounds of the soul from festering and poisoning the spirit. Nothing, it seems to me, is so much misunderstood as forgiveness. The popular idea is that the whole benefit of forgiveness is to the person who is forgiven. Really, there is a very much greater benefit to the person who forgives. The one who is forgiven may merely escape punishment, but the one who forgives experiences a positive spiritual expansion. Believe me, Dave, it is the only philosophy which rings true under the most critical tests; which is absolutely dependable in every emergency."

"Is that Christianity?" he ventured.

"It is one side of Christianity. The other side is service. If you are willing to forgive and ready to serve I don't think you need worry much over the details of your creed. Creeds, after all, are not expressed in words, but in lives. When you know how a man lives you know what he believes—always."

"Suppose I forgive—what then?"

"Service. You are needed right now, Dave—forgive my frankness—your country needs you right now. You have the qualities which make you extremely valuable. You must dismiss this grievance from your mind, at least dismiss your resentment over it, and then place yourself at the disposal of your country. The way is so clear that it cannot be misunderstood."

"That is what I had been thinking of," he said. "At least that part about serving my country, although I don't think my motives were as high as you would make them. But the war can't last. It'll be all over before I can take a hand. Civilization has gone too far for such a thing as this to last. It is unbelievable."

"I'm not so sure," she answered, gravely. "Of course, I know nothing about Germany. But I do know something about our own people. I know how selfish and individualistic and sordid and money-grabbing we have been; how slothful and incompetent and self-satisfied we have been, and I fear it will take a long war and sacrifices and tragedies altogether beyond our present imagination to make us unselfish and public-spirited and clean and generous; it will take the strain and emergency of war to make us vigorous and efficient; it will take the sting of many defeats to impose that humility which will be the beginning of our regeneration. I am not worrying about the defeat of Germany. If our civilization is better than that of Germany we shall win, ultimately, and if our civilization is worse than that of Germany we shall be defeated, ultimately,—and we shall deserve to be defeated. But I rather think that neither of these alternatives will be the result. I rather think that the test of war will show that there are elements in German civilization which are better than ours, and elements in our civilization which are better than theirs, and that the good elements will survive and form the basis of a new civilization better than either."

"If that is so," Dave replied, "if this war is but the working out of immutable law which proposes to put all the elements of civilization to the supreme test and retain only those which are justifiable by that test, why should I—or any one else—fight? And," he added as an after-thought, "what about that principle of forgiveness?"

"We must fight," she answered, "because it is the law that we must fight; because it is only by fighting that we can justify the principles for which we fight. If we hold our principles as being not worth fighting for the new civilization will throw those principles in the discard. And that, too, covers the question of forgiveness. Forgiveness, in fact, does not enter into the consideration at all. We must fight, not because we hate Germany, but because we love certain principles which Germany is endeavouring to overthrow. The impulse must be love, not hate."

She had turned and faced him while she spoke, and he felt himself strangely carried away by the earnestness and fervour of her argument. What a wonderful woman she was! How she had stripped the issue of the detail and circumstance which was confusing even statesmen, and laid it before him in positive terms which he could find no argument to dispute! And how in his hour of distress, when he stood on the verge of utter recklessness and indifference, she had infused into him a strange and new ambition—an ambition which deepened and enriched every phase of life, and yet which held life itself less worthy than its own attainment! And as he looked at her he

again thought of Irene, and suddenly he felt himself engulfed in a great tenderness, and he knew that even yet—

"What am I to do?" he said. "I am willing to accept your philosophy. I admit that mine has broken down, and I am willing to try yours. What am I to do?"

In the darkness of her own shadow she set her teeth for that answer. It was to be the crowning act of her self-renunciation, and it strained every fibre of her resolution. She could not allow him to stay where he was, even in uniform. The danger was two-fold. In a moment of weakness he would probably shoot Conward, and in a moment of weakness she would probably disclose her love. And if Dave should ever marry her he must win her first.

"You had better go overseas and enlist in England," she told him calmly, although her nails were biting her palms. "You will get quicker action that way. And when you come back you must see Irene, and you must learn from your own heart whether you really loved her or not. And if you find you did not, then—then you will be free to—to—to think of some other woman."

"I am afraid I shall never care to think of any other woman," he answered. "Except you. But some way you're different. I don't think of you as a woman, you know; not really, in a way. I can't explain it, Edith, but you're something more—something better than all that."

"I assure you I am very much a woman—"

But he had sprung to his feet. "Edith, I can never thank you enough for what you have said to me to-night. You have put some spirit back into my body. I am going to follow your advice. There's a train east in two hours and I'm going on it. Fortunately my property, or most of it, has dissolved the way it came. I must pack a few things, and have a bath and shave and dress."

She moved toward him with extended hand. "Good-bye, Dave," she said.

He held her hand fast in his. "Good-bye, Edith. I can never forget—I can never repay—all you have been. It may sound foolish to you after all I have said, but I sometimes wonder if—if I had not met Irene—if—" He paused and went hot with embarrassment. What would she think of him? An hour ago he had been ready to kill or be killed in grief over his frustrated love, and already he was practically making love to her. Had he brought her to his rooms for this? What a hypocrite he was!

"Forgive me, Edith," he said, as he released her. "I am not quite myself.... I hold you in very high respect as one of God's good women. Good-bye."

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

When Irene Hardy pursued Dave from the house the roar of his motor car was already drowned in the hum of the city streets. Hatless she ran the length of a full block; then, realizing the futility of such a chase, returned with almost equal haste to her home. She burst in and discovered Conward holding a bottle of smelling salts to the nose of her mother, who had sufficiently recovered to sit upright in her chair.

"What is the meaning of this?" she demanded of Conward. "Why did he threaten to shoot, and why did he leave as he did? You know; tell me."

"I am sure I wish I could tell you," said Conward, with all his accustomed suavity. In truth Conward, having somewhat recovered from his fright, was in rather good spirits. Things had gone better than he had dared to hope. Elden was eliminated, for the present at any rate, and now was the time to win Irene. Not just now, perhaps, but soon, when the shock of her interrupted passion turned her to him for companionship.

She stood before him, flushed and vibrating, and with flashing eyes. "You're lying, Conward," she said, deliberately. "First you lied to him and now you lie to me. There can be no other explanation. Where is that gun? He said I would know what to do with it."

"I have it," said Conward, partly carried off his feet by her violence. "I will keep it until you are a little more reasonable, and, perhaps, a little more respectful."

"Irene," said Mrs. Hardy, sharply, "what way is that to speak to Mr. Conward? You are out of your head, child. Such a scene, Mr. Conward. Such a scene in my house! That cow *puncher*! I always knew it would come out some time. It is breeding that tells, Mr. Conward. Oh, if the papers should learn of this!"

"That's all you think of," Irene retorted. "A scene, and the papers. You don't trouble to even wonder what was the occasion of the scene. You and this—this *biped*, are at the bottom of it. You

have been planning to force me along a course I will not go, and you have done something, something horrible—I don't know what—to cause Dave to act as he did. But I'm going to know. I'm going to find out. You're afraid of the papers. I'm not. I'll give the whole story to them tomorrow. I'll tell that you insulted him, Conward, and how you stood there, a grinning, gaping coward under the muzzle of his gun. How I wish I had a photograph of it," she exclaimed, with a little hysterical laugh. "It would look fine on the front page." She broke into peals of laughter and rushed up the stairs.

In the morning she was very sober and pale, and marks of distress and sleeplessness were furrowed in her face. She greeted her mother with cold civility, and left her breakfast untouched. She gave part of her morning to Charlie; it was saving balm to her to have some one upon whom she could pour affection. Then she went to the telephone. She called Dave's office; nothing was known of Mr. Elden; he had been working there last night; he was not down yet. She called his apartments; there was no answer. Then, with a bright thought, she called the garage. Mr. Elden's car was out; had not been in at all during the night. Then she tried a new number.

"Hello, is that the office of *The Call*? Will you let me speak to——"

Her mother interrupted almost frantically. "Irene, you are not going to tell the papers? You mustn't do that. Think of what it means—the disgrace—a shooting affair, almost, in our home. Think of me, your mother——"

"I'll think of you on one consideration—that you explain what happened last night, and tell me where Dave Elden is."

"I can't explain. I don't know. And I don't know——"

"And you don't want to know. And you don't care, so long as you can keep it out of the papers. I do. I'm going to find out the facts about this, if every paper in the country should print them. Hello? Yes, I want to speak to Miss Morrison."

In a few words she explained Dave's sudden disappearance, stripping the incident of all but vital facts. Bert Morrison was all sympathy. "It's a big story, you know," she said, "but we won't think of it that way. Not a line, so far as I am concerned. Edith Duncan is the girl we need. A sort of adopted sister to Dave. She may know more than any of us."

But Edith knew absolutely nothing; nothing, except that her own heart was thrown into a turmoil of emotions. She spent the day and the evening down town, rotating about the points where Dave might likely be found. And the next morning she called on Irene Hardy.

In spite of all her efforts at self-control she trembled as she pressed the bell; trembled violently as she waited for the door to open. She had never met Irene Hardy; it was going to be a strange experience, introducing herself to the woman who had been preferred over her, and who had, apparently, proven so unworthy of that preference. She had difficult things to say, and even while she said them she must fight a battle to the death with the jealousy of her natural womanhood. And she must be very, very careful that in saying things which were hard to say she did not say hard things. And, most difficult of all, she must try to pave the way to a reconciliation between Dave and the woman who stood between her and happiness.

Irene attended the door, as was her custom. Her eyes took in Edith's face and figure with mild surprise; Edith was conscious of the process of a quick intellect endeavouring to classify her;—solicitor, music teacher, business girl? And in that moment of pause she saw Irene's eyes, and a strange commotion of feeling surged through her. There was something in those eyes that suggested to Edith a new side to Dave's nature; it was as though the blind had suddenly been drawn from strange chambers of his soul. So this was the woman Dave had chosen to love. No; one does not choose whom one will love; one loves without choosing. Edith was conscious of that; she knew that in her own life. And even as she looked this first time upon Irene she became aware of a subtle attraction gathering about her; she felt something of that power which had held Dave to a single course through all these years. And suddenly a great new truth was born in Edith Duncan. Suddenly she realized that if the steel at any time prove unfaithful to the magnet the fault lies not in the steel, but in the magnet. What a change of view, what a reversion of all accepted things, came with the realization of that truth which roots down into the bedrock of all nature!...

"Won't you come in?" Irene was saying. Her voice was sweet and musical, but there was a note of sadness in it which set responsive chords atremble all through Edith's heart. Must she love this woman? Must she, in spite of herself, love this, of all women?

"I am Edith Duncan," she managed to say. "I—I think I have something to say that may interest you."

There was a quick leap in Irene's eyes; the leap of that intuitive feminine sense of danger which so seldom errs in dealing with its own sex, and is yet so unreliable a defence from the dangers of the other. Mrs. Hardy was in the living-room. "Won't you come up to my work shop?" Irene answered without change of voice, and they ascended the stairs together.

"I draw a little," Irene was saying, talking fast. "Oh yes, I have quite commercialized my art,

such as it is. I draw pictures of shoes, and shirt waists, and other women's wear which really belong to the field of a feminine artist. But I haven't lost my soul altogether. I daub in colour a little—yes, daub, that's the word. But it keeps one's soul alive. You will hardly recognize that," she said, indicating an easel, "but here is the original." She ran up the blind of the window which looked from the room out to the westward, and far over the brown shoulders of the foothills rose the Rockies, majestic, calm, imperturbable, their white summits flashing in the blaze of autumn sunshine. "No warfare there," Irene went on. "No plotting, no cruelty, no cowardice, no misunderstanding. And to think that they will stand there forever; forever, as we know time; when our city, our civilization, the very memory of our age shall have gone out. I never look at them without feeling how—how—how—"

She trembled, and her voice choked; she put out her arm to a chair. When she turned her face there were tears on it.... "Tell me,—Edith," she said.... "You know" ...

"I know some things," Edith managed to say. "I know, *now*, that I do not know all. Dave and I are old friends—my father took a liking to him and he used often to be in our house—he made him think of our own boy that was killed and would have been just his age—and we got to know each other very well and he told me about you, long ago. And last night I found him at his rooms, almost mad, and swearing to shoot Conward. And then he told me that—that—"

"Yes? Yes? What did he tell you? I am not afraid—"

Edith turned her eyes to where the white crests of the mountains cut like a crumpled keel through a sea of infinite blue. "He told me he saw Conward here ... upstairs ... and Conward made a boast ... and he would have shot him but you rushed upon him and begged him not to. He said you would have taken the bullet yourself rather than it should find Conward."

"Oh, oh," the girl cried, in the pain of one mortally hurt. "How could he think that? I didn't care for him—for Conward—but for Dave. I knew there had been a quarrel—I didn't know why—and I knew if Dave shot him—and he *can* shoot—I've seen him break six bottles out of six on the gallop—it wasn't self-defence—whatever it was he couldn't plead that—and they'd hang him, and that was all I saw, Edith, that was all I saw, and I would—yes I *would* rather have taken the bullet myself than that that should happen—"

"You poor girl!" said Edith. "You poor girl," and her arms found the other's neck. "You have been hurt, hurt." And then, under her breath, "More than me."

..."What has he done?"

"He talked his problems over with me, and after he had talked awhile he became more reasonable. He had already been convinced that he should offer his services to his country, in these times. And I think I persuaded him that it was better to leave vengeance where it belonged. He said he couldn't remain here, and he has already left for England. I am afraid I encouraged him to leave at once. You see, I didn't understand."

Irene had taken a chair, and for some minutes she sat in silence. "I don't blame you," she said at length. "You gave him good advice. And I don't blame him, although he might have been less ready to jump at conclusions. There remains only one thing for me to do."

"What?" said Edith, after a moment's hesitation.

"Follow him! I shall follow him, and make him understand. If he must go into battle—with all that that means—he must go in knowing the truth. You have been very kind, Miss Duncan. You have gone out of your way to do me a great service, and you have shown more kindness than I have any right to claim from a stranger.... I feel, too, the call for vengeance," she exclaimed, springing to her feet, "but first I must find Dave. I shall follow him at once. I shall readily locate him in some way through the military service. Everything is organized; they will be able to find his name."

She accompanied her visitor to the door. They shook hands and looked for a moment in each other's eyes. And then Edith burst away and hurried down the street.

Irene had searched London for two weeks. The confidence of her earlier inquiries had diminished with each successive blind trail, which, promising results at first, led her into a maze of confusion and disappointment. The organization of the military service commanded less enthusiasm than she had felt a month before. She saw it struggling with the apparently impossible; it was as though she, in her little studio, had been suddenly called upon to paint all the portraits in the world ... In some degree she understood the difficulties. In equal degree she sympathized with those who were striving to overcome them and she hung on from day to day in her search with a dogged determination which set its teeth against admitting that the search was hopeless. Her little store of money was fast dwindling away; she looked into the face of every man in uniform with a pathetic earnestness that more than once caused her to be misunderstood.

At last one great fear had settled on her heart. It came upon her first suddenly on shipboard; she had resolutely thrown it out of her mind; but it had been knocking ever since for admittance,

and more than once she had almost let it in. Suppose Dave should not enlist under his right name? In such a case her chance of finding him was the mere freak of accidental meeting; a chance not to be banked upon in a country already swarming with its citizen soldiery.... And yet there was nothing to do but keep on.

She had sought a park bench where groups of soldiers were continually moving by. The lights shone on their faces, and her own tired eyes followed them incessantly. Always her ear was alert for a voice that should set her heart a-pounding, and more than once she had thought she heard that, voice; more than a score of times she had thought she had seen that figure with its stride of self-reliance, with strength bulging in every muscle. And always it had been to learn that she had been mistaken; always it had been to feel the heart sink just a little lower than before. And still she kept on. There was nothing to do but keep on.

Often she wondered how he would receive her. That cold look which had frozen his features when she seized the revolver in his hand; would it still sit there, too distant and detached to be even scornful? Would she have it to break down; must she, with the fire of her own affection, thaw out an entrance through his icy aloofness? What cost of humiliation would be the price, and would even any price be accepted? She could not know; she could only hope and pray and go on.

As she turned her eyes to follow a group of men in uniform she became aware of a soldier sitting alone in the shadow a short distance away. Some quality about him caught her attention; his face was not discernible, and his figure was too much in the shadow to more than suggest its outline, but she found herself regarding him with an intentness that set her pulses racing. Some strange attraction raised her from her seat; she took a step toward him, then steadied herself. Should she dare risk it again? And yet there was something.... She had a sudden plan. She would make no inquiry, no apology; she would walk near by and call him by name. If that name meant nothing to him he would not even notice her presence, but if it should be—

She was within three paces. Still she could discern nothing definitely, but her pulses were raging more wildly than ever. They had deceived her before; could it be that they were deceiving her again?

"Dave," she said.

He turned quickly in his seat; the light fell on her face and he saw her; he was on his feet and had taken a step toward her. Then he stopped, and she saw his features harden as they had on that dreadful occasion which now seemed so long ago. Would he turn on his heel? If he did she must rush upon him. She must tell him now, she must plead with him, reason with him, prevail upon him at all costs.

"Well?" he said. His voice was mechanical, but in it was something which quickened her hope; something which suggested that he was making it mechanical because he dared not let it express the human emotion which was struggling for utterance.

"Let me talk to you, Dave," she pleaded. "I have followed you around the world for this. Let me talk. I can explain everything."

He stood still so long that she wondered if he never would speak. She dared not reach her hands to him, she could only stand and wait.

"Irene," he said, "why did you follow me here?"

"There is only one answer, Dave. Because I love you, and would follow you anywhere. No one can stop me doing that; no one, Dave—except you."



[Illustration: "There is only one answer, Dave. Because I love you."]

And again he stood, and she knew that he was turning over in his mind things weightier than life and death, and that when he spoke again his course would be set. Then, in the partial shadow, she saw his arms slowly extend; they rose, wide and strong, and extended toward her. There was a quick step, and they met about her, and the world swooned and went by....

"I can explain everything," she said, when she could talk.

"You need explain nothing," he returned. "I have lived the torments of the damned. Edith Duncan was right; she said if it were real love it would never give up. 'Endureth all things,' she said. 'All things,' she said.... There is no limit."

She caressed his cheeks with her fingers, and knew by the touch that they were brown again as they had been in those great days of the foothills. "But I must tell you, dear," she said, "so that you may understand." And then she patched together the story, from what she knew, and from what Edith Duncan had told her, and Dave filled in what neither had known, including the incident earlier on that fateful evening. She could see his jaws harden as they pieced the plot together, and she knew what he was thinking.

"Your country needs you more," she whispered. "It is better that way. And what a man you are in uniform! I think I see you smashing heads instead of bottles. Six out of six, Dave! It's awful, but you must do it. Already we know what has happened in Belgium. You will forget your own wrongs in the greater wrongs of others.... And I shall join the service as a nurse. My father was a doctor, and I can soon pick it up."

She chatted on, but he had become suddenly grave. "I don't think that is your course, Irene," he said. "This is going to be a bigger job than it looked. The Government will get soldiers and nurses; the popular imagination turns to such things. But it will be neither soldiers nor nurses that will win the war. I feel sure of that now. It has come to me, perhaps as a kind of presentiment, but I feel absolutely sure. The determining factor will be food. The world's margin is narrow enough in normal times, and now we are plunged into the abnormal. Millions of men will be taken from production and turned to purposes of destruction. They will be taken from offices, where they need little food, and put in the trenches, where they need much food. Countries will be devastated; armies will retreat, destroying all food as they go. Ships will go down with cargoes of wheat; incendiary fires will swallow warehouses of food. I do not regret my decision, I believe my place is in the trenches; but those less fit for the fight than I must, in some form or other, produce food. That includes the women; it includes you."

"Me? But what can I do?"

"Since I left home I've thought a good deal of the old ranch. I despised it in those prosperous days—those days we thought we were prosperous—but the prosperity is gone and the ranch remains. It still lies out there, just as it did when you and your father motored down that afternoon a dozen years ago. I think you'll have to go back there, Reenie. I think you'll have to take the boy Charlie, and what other help you can get, and go back to the old ranch and raise

something for the soldiers to eat. You can do it. There are good men to be had; men who can't very well carry a rifle, but can drive a plow. And believe me, Reenie, it's the plow that's going to win. Go back and put them at it. Think of every furrow as another trench in the defences which shall save your home from the fate of Belgium's homes. It's not as easy as going to the front; it hasn't got the heroic ring to it, and I suppose there are many who will commercialize it. Let them. We shall need their profits after the war to pay our debts. But it's the thing that must be done. And you'll do it, won't you?"

"I'll do what ever needs to be done, Dave. I'd rather be by your side, or as near as may be, but if you say that my duty lies back on the old ranch I shall go back to the old ranch and raise food for my soldier. And when it's all over we shall ride those old hillsides again.... Up the canyon, you remember, Dave? The little niche in the wall of the canyon, and all the silence and the sunlight?... Forever...."

CHAPTER XXII

Any philosophy which accepts the principle that the great, over-shadowing events of life are subject to an intelligent controlling influence must of necessity grant that the same principle applies to the most commonplace and every-day experiences. It is impossible to believe that the World War, for example, has a definite place in the eternal scheme of the universe without believing the same of the apparently most trivial incident in the life of Kaiser Wilhelm, Lloyd George, or Woodrow Wilson, or, for that matter, of the humblest soldier in the ranks. The course of the greatest stream of events may well be deflected by incidents so commonplace as to quite escape the notice of the casual observer.

Some such thought as this comforted me—or, at least, would have comforted me, had I thought it—when a leaking gasoline tank left me, literally as well as figuratively, high and dry in the foothills. The sun of an August afternoon blazed its glory from a cloudless sky; far across the shimmering hills copper-colored patches of ripening wheat stood out ruddy and glowing like twentieth century armour on the brown breast of the prairie; low in a valley to the left a ribbon of silver-green mountain water threaded its way through fringes of spruce and cottonwood, while on the uplands beyond sleek steers drowsed in the sunshine, and far to the westward the Rockies slept unconcerned in their draperies of afternoon purple. All these scenes the eye took in without enthusiasm, almost without approval; and then fell on the whitewashed ranch buildings almost in the shadow underneath. And in these days a ranch—almost any ranch—means gasoline.

I soon was at the door. The walls had been recently white-washed; there were new shingles of red cedar on the roof; flowers bloomed by the path that led down to the corrals. My knock attracted a little chap of two-and-a-half or three years; his stout hands shoved the screen back, and I found myself ushered into his company. There evidently was no one else about, so I visited, and we talked on those things which are of importance in the world of three-year-olds.

"Muvver's don to the wiver," he confided. "She tum back pwetty soon."

"And Father?" I asked. "Where is he?"

Into the dark eyes came a deeper look; they suddenly shone with the spirituality of a life only three years removed from the infinite. By what instruction, I afterwards wondered, by what almost divine charm had she been able to instil into his young mind the honour and the glory and the pride of it? For there was pride, and something more than pride; adoration, perhaps, in his words as he straightened up and said in perfect English, "My father was a soldier. He was killed at Courcelette."

I looked in his little, sunburned face; in his dark, proud eyes; and presently a strange mist enveloped the room. How many little faces, how many pairs of eyes! It was just fading away when a step sounded on the walk, and I arose as she reached the door.

"The Man of the House has made me at home," I managed to say. "I am shipwrecked on the hill, for a little gasoline."

"There is plenty out in the field, where the tractor is," she replied. "You will find it without difficulty. Or if you care to wait here, Charlie may be along presently."

Her voice had sweet, modulated tones, with just that touch of pathos which only the Angel of Suffering knows how to add. And her face was fair, and gentle, and a little sad, and very sweet.

"He has told me," I said. There seemed no reason why I should not say it. She had entered into the sisterhood—that universal sisterhood of suffering which the world has known in these long, lonely years.... And it was between us, for we were all in the family. There was no occasion to scrape acquaintance by slow, conventional thrust and parry.

"Yes," she said, sitting down, and motioning me to a chair. "I was bitter at first. I was dreadfully bitter at first. But gradually I got a different view of it. Gradually I came to feel and know that all we can feel and know here is on the surface; on the outside, as you might say, and we can't know the purpose until we are inside. It is as though life were a riddle, and the key is hidden, and the door behind which the key is hidden is called Death. And I don't believe it's all for nothing; I won't believe it's all for nothing. If I believed it was all for nothing I would quit; we would all quit.

"Then there is the suffering," she continued, after a pause. "I don't know why there should be suffering, but I know if there were no suffering there would be no kindness. It is not until you are hit—hard hit—that you begin to think of other people. Until then all is selfishness. But we women—we women of the war—we have nothing left to be selfish for. But we have the whole world to be unselfish for. It's all different, and it can never go back. We won't let it go back. We've paid too much to let it go back."

It was hard to find a reply. "I think I knew your husband, a little," I ventured. "He was a—a man."

"He was all that," she said. She arose and stood for a moment in an attitude of hesitation; her fingers went to her lips as though enjoining caution. Then, with quick decision, she went into an inner room, from which she returned with a letter.

"If you knew him you may care to read this," she said. "It's very personal, and yet, some way, everything is impersonal now, in a sense. There has been such a common cause, and such a wave of common suffering, that it seems to flood out over the individual and embrace us all. Individualism is gone. It's the community now; the state; mankind, if you like, above everything. I suppose, so far as German kultur stands for that, it has been imposed upon the world.... So this is really, in a sense, your letter as well as mine."

I took it and read:

I have had many letters to write since my service began as a nurse in the war, but never have I approached the task with such mixed emotions. The pain I must give you I would gladly bear myself if I could; but it is not all pain; underneath it, running through it in some way I cannot explain, is a note so much deeper than pain that it must be joy.

You will already have been advised that David Elden was among those who fell at Courcellette. It is trite to say that you have the sympathy of a grateful nation. How grateful the nation really is we shall know by its treatment of the heroes who survive the war, and of the dependents of those who have crossed over. But nothing can rob you of the knowledge that he played a man's part. Nothing can debar you from that universal fellowship of sympathy which is springing up wherever manhood is valued at its worth.

A new Order has been born into the world; the Order of Suffering. Not that it is new, either; it has been with us since the first mother went into the shadow for her first child; but always suffering has been incidental; a matter of the individual; a thing to be escaped if possible. But now it is universal, a thing not to be escaped, but to be accepted, readily, bravely, even gladly. And all who so accept it enter into the new Order, and wear its insignia, which is unselfishness and sympathy and service. And in that Order you shall not be least, measured by either your sacrifice or the spirit in which you accept it.

But you are yearning for his last word; for some voice that will seem to you now almost a voice out of the grave, and I am happy to be able to bring you that word. It was something more than chance that guided me that night, as it is every night.

We were well behind the line of actual fighting, but still in the danger zone of artillery fire. Night had settled in; all was darkness save for occasional distant flares. I had become detached from my party in moving to another station; lost, if you like, yet not lost; never have I gone so directly to so great a destination. While trying to get my location I became aware of a presence; it will sound strange to you, but I became intensely aware of *your* presence. Of course I knew it could not be you, in the flesh, but you it seemed to be, nevertheless. I moved as though led by an invisible hand, and presently I found a bit of shattered wall. In the gloom I could just discern the form of a man lying in the shelter of the wall—if you could call it shelter—it rose scarce a foot above the ground.

I knelt beside him and turned my torch on to his face. It was pale even through the brown skin; the eyes were closed; the hair was wet and plastered on the forehead; there were smears of blood in it and on his cheeks. As my light fell on his lips they framed a smile.

"Reenie," he said. "It was good of you to come. I knew you would come."

"I am here, Dave," I answered, and I think you will forgive me the impersonation. "Now let me find out where you are hurt, and we'll fix you up, and get you moved presently."

He opened his eyes and looked at me with the strange look of a man whose thread of consciousness is half unravelled. "Oh, it's you, Edith," he said, when he had taken me in. "Funny, I thought it was Irene. I must have been dreaming."

I questioned him again about his wound, and began feeling his hair. "It's not there," he said. "Guess I got it all over my hands. They got me this time. Shrapnel, in the body. Don't waste time on me. Some other fellow may have a chance."

I found, with a little examination, that the case was as bad as he supposed. Fortunately, the wound had induced a local paralysis, and he was not suffering to any great degree. I placed my hand in his and felt his grip tighten on it.

"I'm going to stay till it's over, Dave. We'll see it out together."

"That's decent," he answered, and then was still for quite a time.

"I've often wondered what was on the other side," he said at length. "I shall know presently."

"You are not afraid?" I whispered.

"No. Only sort of—curious. And—reverent. I guess it's reverent... You know I haven't been much on religion. Never seemed to get the formula. What is the formula? I mean the key—the thing that gives it all in one word?"

"In one word—sacrifice."

"I walked out of church once because of some doctrine about sacrifice," he continued. "I couldn't go it... And yet—there may be something in it. It's sacrifice here, Edith. War is sacrifice. Sacrifice for other people. It's not all on the surface. There's something deeper than we know."

"He that loseth his life shall find it," I quoted.

He did not answer, but I could see his lips smiling again. His breath was more labored. A few drops of rain fell, and some of them spattered on his face.

Presently he chuckled. It was an eerie sensation, out on that broad plain of death, alone by the side of this man who was already far into the shadow,—to hear him chuckle.

"That splash of water—you remember—it made me think of the time we pulled the old car into the stream, and the harness broke, or something, and I had to carry you. You remember that, Reenie?" I could only say "Yes," and press his hand. His mind was back on the old, old trails.

He became suddenly sober. "And when Brownie was killed," he went on, "I said it was the innocent thing that got caught. Perhaps I was right. But perhaps it's best to get caught. Not for the getting caught, but for the—the compensations. It's the innocent men that are getting killed. And perhaps it's best. Perhaps there are compensations worth while."

His voice was weaker, and I had to lean close to catch his words.

"I'm going—out," he said. "Kiss me, Reenie."

And then I kissed him—for you.

Suddenly he sat up.

"The mountains!" he exclaimed, and his voice was a-thrill with the pride of his old hills. "See, the moonlight—on the mountains!"

Then his strength, which seemed to have gathered itself for this one last vision of the place of his boyhood, gave way, and he fell back. And he did not speak any more.

And what can I add? Dear, it is not defeat. It is promise. It is hope.

Some day we shall know. But until then we shall go on. It is woman's bit to carry on. But not in despondency; not in bitterness; not in anger or despair. *He* didn't go out that way. He was reverent—and a little curious, and he went out with a smile. And we shall go on, and carry his smile and his confidence through the valley of our sacrifice. What am I doing, speaking of *our* sacrifice?

I salute you, sister in the Order of Suffering—and of hope.

EDITH DUNCAN.

I handed the letter back to her, and for a time I had no words. "Won't you let me tell the story?" I said at length. "The world is full of sorrow, and it needs voices to give that sorrow words, and perhaps turn it into hope—as this letter does."

She hesitated, and I realized then how much I had asked. "It is the story of my life—my soul," she said. "Yet, if it would help—"

"Without names," I hastened to explain. "Without real names of places or people."

And so, in that little white-washed home, where the brown hills rise around and the placid mountains look down from the distance, and a tongue of spruce trees beyond the stream stands sentinel against the open prairie, she is carrying on, not in despondency and bitterness, but in service and in hope. And so her sisters, all this world over, must carry on, until their sweetness and their sacrifice shall fill up and flood over all the valleys of hate.... And if you should chance that way, and if you should win the confidence of young Three-year-old, he may stand for you and

say, with his voice filled with the honour and the glory and the pride of it,

"My father was a soldier. He was killed at Courcelette."

THE END

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE COW PUNCHER ***

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