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Title: A Little Norsk; Or, Ol' Pap's Flaxen

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Release date: June 18, 2007 [eBook #21850]
Most recently updated: January 2, 2021

Language: English

*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK A LITTLE NORSK; OR, OL' PAP'S
FLAXEN ***

**A Little Norsk
Or
Ol' Paps' Flaxen**

**By
Hamlin Garland**

Author of
Main Traveled Roads, A Member of the Third House, A Spoil of
Office, Jason Edwards, etc.



NEW YORK
D. APPLETON AND COMPANY
1892

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PRINTED AT THE APPLETON PRESS, U.S.A.

On the Plain.

*My cabin cowers in the pathless sweep
 Of the terrible northern blast;
 Above its roof the wild clouds leap
 And shriek as they hurtle past.
 The snow-waves hiss along the plain,
 Like spectral wolves they stretch and strain
 And race and ramp—with hissing beat,
 Like stealthy tread of myriad feet,
 I hear them pass; upon the roof
 The icy showers swirl and rattle;
 At times the moon, from storms aloof,
 Shines white and wan within the room—
 Then swift clouds drive across the light
 And all the plain is lost to sight,
 The cabin rocks, and on my palm
 The sifted snow falls, cold and calm.*

*God! What a power is in the wind!
 I lay my cheek to the cabin side
 To feel the weight of his giant hands—
 A speck, a fly in the blasting tide
 Of streaming, pitiless, icy sands;
 A single heart with its feeble beat—
 A mouse in the lion's throat—
 A swimmer at sea—a sunbeam's mote
 In the grasp of a tempest of hail and sleet!*

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A LITTLE NORSK.

1

CHAPTER I.

HER ADOPTIVE PARENTS.

"Ans, the next time you twist hay f'r the fire, I wish't you'd dodge the damp spots," said the cook, rising from a prolonged scrutiny of the stove and the bread in the oven. His pose was threatening.

"Cooks are always grumblin'," calmly remarked Anson, drawing on his gloves preparatory to going out to the barn; "but seein' 's this is Chris'mus, I'll go out an' knock a barrel to pieces. I want them biscuit to be O. K. See?"

"Yes: I see."

"Say, Bert!"

"Well?"

"Can't we have some sugar-'lasses on our biscuits, seein' it's Chris'mus?"

2

"Well, I s'pose we can, Ans; but we're gittin' purty low on the thing these days, an' they ain't no tellin' when we'll be able to git more."

"Well, jes' as you say, not as I care." Anson went out into the roaring wind with a shout of defiance, but came back instantly, as if to say something he had forgotten. "Say, wha' d'ye s'pose is the trouble over to the Norsk's? I hain't seen a sign o' smoke over there f'r two 'r three days."

"Well, now you speak of it, Ans, I've be'n thinkin' about that myself. I'm afraid he's out o' coal, 'r sick, 'r somethin'. It 'u'd be mighty tough f'r the woman an' babe to be there without any fire, an' this blizzard whoopin' her up. I guess you'd better go over an' see what's up. I was goin' to speak of it this mornin', but f'rgot it. I'm cook this week, so I guess the job falls on you."

"All right. Here goes."

"Better take a horse."

"No: I guess not. The snow is driftin' purty bad, an' he couldn't git through the drifts, anyway."

3

"Well, lookout f'r y'rself, ol' man. It looks purty owly off in the west. Don't waste any time. I'd hate like thunder to be left alone on a Dakota prairie f'r the rest o' the winter."

Anson laughed back through the mist of snow that blew in the open door, his great-coat and cap allowing only a glimpse of his cheeks.

The sky was bright overhead, but low down around the horizon it looked wild. The air was frightfully cold—far below zero—and the wind had been blowing almost every day for a week, and was still strong. The snow was sliding fitfully along the sod with a stealthy, menacing motion, and far off in the west and north a dense, shining cloud of frost was hanging.

The plain was almost as lone and level and bare as a polar ocean, where death and silence reign undisputedly. There was not a tree in sight, the grass was mainly burned, or buried by the snow, and the little shanties of the three or four settlers could hardly be said to be in sight, half sunk, as they were, in drifts. A large white owl seated on a section stake was the only living thing to be seen.

The boom had not yet struck Buster County. Indeed, it did not seem to Bert Gearheart at this moment that it would ever strike Buster County. It was as cold, dreary, and unprofitable an outlook as a man could face and not go utterly mad. If any of these pioneers could have forecast the winter, they would not have dared to pass it on the plains.

Bert watched his partner as he strode rapidly across the prairie, now lost to sight as a racing troop of snow-waves, running shoulder-high, shot between, now reappearing as the wind lulled.

"This is gittin' pretty monotonous, to tell the honest truth," he muttered as he turned from the little window. "If that railroad don't show up by March, in some shape or other, I'm goin' to give it up. Gittin' free land like this is a little too costly for me. I'll go back to Wiscons', an' rent land on shares."

Bert was a younger-looking man than his bachelor companion; perhaps because his face was clean-shaven and his frame much slighter. He was a silent, moody young fellow, hard to get along with, though of great good heart. Anson Wood succeeded in winning and holding his love even through the trials of masculine housekeeping. As Bert kept on with the dinner, he went often to the little window facing the east and looked out, each time thawing a hole in the frost on the window-panes.

The wind was rising again, and the night promised to be wild, as the two preceding nights had been. As he moved back and forth setting out their scanty meal, he was thinking of the old life back in Wisconsin in the deeps of the little *coulée*; of the sleigh-rides with the boys and girls; of the Christmas doings; of the damp, thick-falling snow among the pines, where the wind had no terrors; of musical bells on swift horses in the fragrant deeps, where the snowflakes fell like caresses through the tossing branches of the trees.

By the side of such a life the plain, with its sliding snow and ferocious wind, was appalling—a treeless expanse and a racing-ground for snow and wind. The man's mood grew darker while he mused. He served the meal on the rude box which took the place of table, and still his companion did not come. He looked at his watch. It was nearly one o'clock, and yet there was no sign of the sturdy figure of Anson.

The house of the poor Norwegian was about two miles away, and out of sight, being built in a gully; but now the eye could distinguish a house only when less than a mile away. A man could not at times be seen at a distance of ten rods, though occasional lulls in the wind permitted Bert to see nearly to the "First Moccasin."

"He may be in the swale," muttered the watcher as he stood with his eye to the loop-hole. But the next time he looked the plain was as wild and lone as before, save under the rising blast the snow was beginning to ramp and race across the level sod till it looked at times like a sea running white with foam and misty with spray.

At two o'clock he said: "Well, I s'pose Ans has concluded to stay over there to dinner, though what the Norsk can offer as inducement I swear I don't know. I'll eat, anyhow; he can have what's left."

He sat down to his lonely meal, and ate slowly, getting up two or three times from his candle-box in a growing anxiety for Ans, using the heated poker now to clear a spot on the pane. He expressed his growing apprehension, manlike, by getting angry.

"I don't see what the darn fool means by stayin' so late. It'll be dark by four o'clock, er jest as soon as that cloud over there strikes us. You couldn't beat sense into some men's heads with a club."

He had eaten his dinner now, and had taken to pacing up and down the little room, which was exactly six paces long and three wide, and just high enough to permit Anson to walk erect in the highest part.

"Nice fix to leave a man in, ain't it? All alone here, an' a blizzard comin' on! If I ever git out o' this country alive, I'll bet I'll know enough not to come back," he broke out, stamping his foot in a rage. "I don't see what he means by it. If he's caught in that blow, his life ain't worth a cent."

CHAPTER II.

HER FIRST TRIP IN A BLIZZARD.

At half-past two the feelings of the silent watcher began to change. He thought more about his partner out there in the rising wind and thickening snow. The blast roared round the little cabin with a deep, menacing, rising moan, and laid to the stove-pipe a resounding lip, wailing and shouting weirdly. Bert's nervous walk quickened, and he looked so often through the pane that the frost had not time to close up.

Suddenly, out of the blinding, sweeping snow, not ten rods distant, the burly form of Anson burst, head down, blindly staggering forward into the teeth of the tempest. He walked like a man whose strength was almost gone, and he carried a large bundle in his arms.

Gearhart flung the door open, and called in a cheery voice to guide the struggling man to the house. He knew what it was to face such a wind.

"Here ye are, ol' man! Right this way! Keep y'r head down!"

Then, seeing that Anson hardly made headway against the terrible blast, he rushed out, bare-headed as he was, and caught and hurried him in and shut the door.

Reeling blindly, his breath roaring like a furnace, his eyebrows hung with icicles, his face masked with crusted snow, Anson staggered in, crying hoarsely, "Take her!" then slid to the floor, where he lay panting for breath.

Bert caught the bundle from his arms. A wailing, half-smothered cry came from it.

"What is it, Ans?" he asked.

"A kid; warm it," said the giant, trying with his numbed fingers to undo the shawl which wrapped the bundle. Bert hurriedly unwound the shawl, and a frightened child, blue-eyed and flaxen-haired—flossy as unfrosted corn-silk—was disclosed like a nubbin of corn after the husks are stripped off.

"Why, it's little Flaxen Hair! Wha' d'ye bring her over for?"

"'Sh!" said Anson hoarsely. "Mind how y' git her warm! Don't y' see she's froze?"

The little creature was about five, or possibly six years old, scantily clad, but neat and pretty. As her feet began to get warm before the fire, she wailed with pain, which Bert tried to stop by rubbing.

"Put her hands in y'r hair, hold her feet in y'r hands—don't rub 'em," commanded Ans, who was stripping the ice from his eyelashes and from his matted beard, which lay like a shield upon his breast. "Stir up the fire; give her some hot coffee an' some feed. She hain't had anything to eat."

Bert tried to do all these things at once, and could not, but managed finally to get the child a piece of bread and a cup of coffee, and to allay her fears. Ans began to recover from his horrible journey and was able to speak, though his lungs were still painful.

"Ol' man," he said solemnly and tenderly, "I came jest as near stayin' in that last gully down there as a man could an' not. The snow was up to my armpits, an' let me down wherever the weeds was. I had to waller; if it hadn't be'n for her, I guess I'd 'a' give up; but I jest grit m' teeth an' pulled through. There, guess y' hadn't better let her have any more. I guess she'll go to sleep now she's fed an' warmed. Jest le' me take her now, ol' man."

"No: you git rested up."

"See here, it'll rest me to hold that little chap. I'm all right. My hands is frosted some, an' my ears, that's all, but my breath is gittin' back. Come on, now," he pleaded.

Bert surrendered the child, who looked up into the bearded face of the rough fellow, then rested her head on his breast, and went to sleep at last. It made his heart thrill as he felt her little head against his breast. He never had held a child in his arms before.

"Say, Bert, reckon I'm a purty fair picture of a fam'ly man, now, eh? Throw in a couple o' twists more o' hay—"

Bert stirred up the fire.

"Well, now the little one is off, what's up over to the Norsk's? Wha' d'ye bring the child for?" he asked at last.

"Because she was the only livin' soul in the shanty."

"What?" His face was set in horror.

"Fact."

"Where's the Norsk?"

"I don't know. On the prairie somewhere."

"An' the mother?"

"She's—" Here the little one stirred slightly as he leaned forward, and Ans said, with a wink, "She's *asleep*." He winked significantly, and Bert understood what the sleep was. "Be a little careful what y' say—jes' now; the little rat is listenin'. Jest say *relative* when y' mean her—the woman, y' know."

"Yes, sir," he resumed after a moment; "I was scart when I saw that house—when I knocked, an' no one stirred 'r come to the door. They wasn't a track around, an' the barn an' house was all drifted up. I pushed the door open; it was cold as a barn, an' dark. I couldn't see anythin' f'r a minute, but I heard a sound o' cryin' from the bed that made my hair stand up. I rushed over there, an' there lay the mother on the bed, with nothin' on but some kind of a night-dress, an' everythin'—dress, shawl, an' all—piled on an' around that blessed child."

"She was sleepin'?"

"Like a stone. I couldn't believe it at first. I raved around there, split up a chair an' the shelves, an' made a fire. Then I started to rub the woman's hands an' feet, but she was cold an' hard as iron." Bert shuddered in sympathy. "Then I took the child up an' rubbed her; tried to find somethin' f'r her to eat—not a blessed thing in that house! Finally I thought I better bolt f'r home—"

"Lucky you did. Hear that wind! Great heavens! We are in for another two-days' blow of it. That woman, of course, stripped herself to save the child."

"Yes: she did."

"Jes' like a woman! Why didn't she rip down the shelf an' split up the chairs for fuel, or keep walkin' up an' down the room?"

"Now, there it is! She *had* burnt up a lot o' stuff, then took to bed with the child. She rolled her up in all the quilts an' shawls an' dresses they was in the house; then laid down by the side of her, an' put her arm over her—an' froze—jes' like a mother—no judgment!"

"Well, lay her down now, an' eat somethin' y'rself, while I go out an' look after the chores. Lord! it makes me crawl to think of that woman layin' there in the shanty all alone!" he turned and said in a peculiar hesitating voice. He shivered a little as he spoke. "Say, did y' shut the door?"

"Yes: an' it shuts hard. The wind n'r wolves can't open it."

"That's good. I couldn't sleep nights if I thought the coyotes could get in." Bert's imagination seized upon that lonely cabin and the figure lying cold as iron upon the bed. It appealed to him more than to Anson.

By four o'clock it was dark, and the lamp was lighted when Bert came in, bringing an immense load of hay-twists. The ferocious wind, as if exulting in its undisputed sway over the plain, raved in ceaseless fury around the cabin, and lashed the roof with a thousand stinging streams of snow. The tiny shanty did not rock; it shuddered as if with fright. The drifts rose higher on the windows, and here and there through some unseen crevice the snow, fine as bolted flour, found its way like oil, seeming to penetrate the solid boards; and to the stove-pipe the storm still laid hoarse lip, piping incessantly, now dolorously, now savagely, now high, now low.

While the two men sat above the fire that night, discussing the sad case of the woman, the child slept heavily, muttering and sobbing in her sleep.

"The probabilities are," said Anson, in a matter-of-fact way, "the Norsk took his oxen an' started f'r Summit f'r provisions, an' got caught in this blizzard an' froze to death somewhere—got lost in some gully, probably."

"But why didn't he come an' tell us to look after his fam'ly?"

"Well, I s'pose he was afraid to trust us. I don't wonder, as I remember the treatment their women git from the Yankees. We look a good 'eal worse than we are, besides; an' then the poor cuss couldn't talk to us, anyhow, an' he's be'n shy ever since he came, in October."

After a long silence, in which Gearheart went over and studied the face of the sleeper, Anson said: "Well, if he's dead, an' the woman's dead too, we've got to look after this child till some relative turns up. An' that woman's got to be buried."

"All right. What's got to be done had better be done right off. We've only one bed, Ans, an' a cradle hasn't appeared necessary before. How about the sleepin' to-night? If you're goin' into the orphan-asylum business, you'll have to open up correspondence with a furniture store."

Ans reddened a little. "It ain't mine any more'n yours. We're pardners in this job."

"No: I guess not. You look more like a dad, an' I guess I'll shift the responsibility of this thing off onto you. I'll bunk here on the floor, an' you take the child an' occupy the bed."

"Well, all right," answered Anson, going over in his turn and looking down at the white face and tow-coloured hair of the little stranger. "But say, we ain't got no night-clothes f'r the little chap. What'll we do? Put her to sleep jes' as she is?"

"I reckon we'll have to to-night. Maybe you'll find some more clothes over to the shanty."

"Say, Bert," said Ans later.

"Well?"

"It's too darn cold f'r you to sleep on the floor there. You git in here on the back side, an' I'll take the child on the front. She'd be smashed flatter'n a pancake if she was in the middle. She ain't bigger'n a pint o' cider, anyway."

"No, ol' man. I'll lay here on the floor, an' kind o' heave a twist in once in a while. It's goin' to be cold enough to freeze the tail off a brass bull by daylight."

Ans bashfully crept in beside the sleeping child, taking care not to waken her, and lay there thinking of his new responsibility. At every shiver of the cowering cabin and rising shriek of the wind, his heart went out in love toward the helpless little creature whose dead mother lay in the cold and deserted shanty, and whose father was wandering perhaps breathless and despairing on the plain, or lying buried in the snow in some deep ravine beside his patient oxen. He tucked the clothing in carefully about the child, felt to see if her little feet were cold, and covered her head with her shawl, patting her lightly with his great paw.

"Say, Bert!"

"Well, Ans, what now?"

"If this little chap should wake up an' cry f'r its mother, what in thunder would I do?"

"Give it up, ol' boy," was the reply from the depths of the buffalo-ropes before the fire. "Pat her on the back, an' tell her not to cry, or somethin' like that."

"But she can't tell what I say."

"Oh, she'll understand if y' kind o' chuckle an' gurgle like a fam'ly man." But the little one slept on, and when, about midnight, Bert got up to feed the fire, he left the stove door open to give light, and went softly over to the sleepers. Ans was sleeping with the little form close to his breast, and the poor, troubled face safe under his shaggy beard.

And all night long the blasting wind, sweeping the sea of icy sands, hissed and howled round the little sod cabin like surf beating on a half-sunken rock. The wind and the snow and the darkness possessed the plain; and Cold (whose other name is Death) was king of the horrible carnival. It seemed as though morning and sunlight could not come again, so absolute was the sway of night and death.

CHAPTER III.

THE BURIAL OF HER DEAD MOTHER.

When Anson woke the next morning, he found the great flower-like eyes of the little waif staring straight into his face with a surprise too great for words or cries. She stared steadily and solemnly into his open eyes for a while, and when he smiled she smiled back; but when he lifted his large hand and tried to brush her hair she grew frightened, pushing her little fists against him, and began to cry "Mor! Mor Kom!"

This roused Gearheart, who said:

"Well, Ans, what are y' goin' to do with that child? This is your mornin' to git breakfast. Come, roll out. I've got the fire goin' good. I can't let y' off; it'll break up our system."

Anson rolled out of the bunk and dressed hurriedly in the cold room. The only sound was the roar of the stove devouring the hay-twist. Anson danced about.

"Thunder an' black cats, ain't it cold! The wind has died down, or we'd be froze stiffer'n a wedge. It was mighty good in you, ol' man, to keep the stove goin' durin' the night. The child has opened her eyes brighter'n a dollar, but I tell you I don't like to let her know what's happened to her relatives."

The little one began to wail in a frightened way, being alone in the dim corner.

"There she goes now; she's wantin' to go home! That's what she's askin', jes' like's not. Say, Bert, what the devil can I do?"

"Talk to her, Ans; chuckle to her."

"Talk! She'll think I'm threatenin' to knock her head off, or somethin'. There there, don't ee cry! We'll go see papa soon.—Confound it, man, I can't go on with this thing! There, there! See, child, we're goin' to have some nice hot pancakes now; goin' to have breakfast now. See, ol' pap's goin' to fry some pancakes. Whoop—see!" He took down the saucepan, and flourished it in order to make his meaning plainer. Bert laughed.

"That's as bad as your fist. Put that down, Ans. You'll scare the young one into a fit; you ain't built f'r a jumpin'-jack."

The child did indeed set up a louder and more distracting yell. Getting desperate, Anson seized her in his arms, and, despite her struggles, began tossing her on his shoulder. The child understood him and ceased to cry, especially as Gearheart began to set the table, making a pleasant clatter, whistling the while.

The glorious light of the morning made its way only dimly through the thickly frosted window-panes; the boards snapped in the horrible cold; out in the barn the cattle were bellowing and kicking with pain.

"Do you know," said Bert, impressively, "I couldn't keep that woman out o' my mind. I could see her layin' there without any quilts on her, an' the mice a-runnin' over her. God! it's tough, this bein' alone on a prairie on such a night."

"I knew I'd feel so, an' I jest naturally covered her up an' tucked the covers in, the child a-lookin' on. I thought she'd feel better, seein' her ma tucked in good an' warm. Poor little rat!"

"Did you do that, ol' man?"

"You bet I did! I couldn't have slep' a wink if I hadn't."

"Well, why didn't y' tell me, so't *I* could sleep?"

"I didn't think you'd think of it that way, not havin' seen her."

The child now consented to sit in one of the chairs and put her feet down by the stove. She wept silently now, with that infrequent, indrawn sob, more touching than wails. She felt that these strangers were her friends, but she wanted her mother. She ate well, and soon grew more resigned. She looked first at one and then at the other of the men as they talked, trying to understand their strange language. Then she fell to watching a mouse that stole out from behind the flour-barrels, snatching a crumb occasionally and darting back, and laughed gleefully once, and clapped her hands.

"Now, the first thing after the chores, Ans, is that woman over there. Of course it's out o' the question buryin' her, but we'd better go over an' git what things there is left o' the girl's, an' fasten up the shanty to keep the wolves out."

"But then—"

"What?"

"The mice. You can't shut them out."

"That's so. I never thought o' that. We've got to make a box, I guess; but it's goin' to be an awful job for me, Ans, to git her into it. I thought I wouldn't have to touch her."

"Le' me go; I've seen her once an' you hain't. I'd just as soon."

"Heaven an' earth! what could I do with the babe? She'd howl like a coyote, an' drive me plumb wild. No: you're elected to take care o' the child. I ain't worth a picayune at it. Besides, you had your share yesterday."

And so, in the brilliant sunshine of that bitterly cold morning, Gearheart crunched away over the spotless snow, which burned under his feet—a land mocking, glorious, pitiless. Far off some slender columns of smoke told of two or three hearth-fires, but mainly the plain was level and lifeless as the Polar Ocean, appallingly silent, no cry or stir in the whole expanse, no tree to creak nor bell to ring. 27

It required strong effort on the part of the young man to open the door of the cottage, and he stood for some time with his hand on the latch, looking about. There was perfect silence without and within, no trace of feet or hands anywhere. All was as peaceful and unbroken as a sepulchre.

Finally, as if angry with himself, Gearheart shook himself and pushed open the door, letting the morning sun stream in. It lighted the bare little room and fell on the frozen face and rigid, half-open eyes of the dead woman with a strong, white glare. The thin face and worn, large-jointed hands lying outside the quilt told of the hardships which had been the lot of the sleeper. Her clothing was clean and finer than one would expect to see. 28

Gearheart stood looking at her for a long time, the door still open, for he felt re-enforced in some way by the sun. If any one had come suddenly and closed the door on him and the white figure there, he would have cried out and struggled like a madman to escape, such was his unreasoning fear of the dead.

At length, with a long breath, he backed out and closed the door. Going to the barn, he found a cow standing at an empty manger, and some hens and pigs frozen in the hay. Looking about for some boards to make a coffin, he came upon a long box in which a reaper had been packed, and this he proceeded to nail together firmly, and to line with pieces of an old stove-pipe at such places as he thought the mice would try to enter.

When it was all prepared, he carried the box to the house and managed to lay it down beside the bed; but he could not bring himself to touch the body. He went out to see if some one were not coming. The sound of a human voice would have relieved him at once, and he could have gone on without hesitation. But there was no one in sight, and no one was likely to be; so he returned, and summoning all his resolution, took one of the quilts from the bed and placed it in the bottom of the box. Then he removed the pillow from beneath the head of the dead woman and placed that in the box. Then he paused, the cold moisture breaking out on his face. 29

Like all young persons born far from war, and having no knowledge of death even in its quiet forms, he had the most powerful organic repugnance toward a corpse. He kept his eye on it as though it were a sleeping horror, likely at a sudden sound to rise and walk. More than this, there had always been something peculiarly sacred in the form of a woman, and in his calmer moments the dead mother appealed to him with irresistible power.

At last, with a sort of moan through his set teeth, he approached the bed and threw the sheet over the figure, holding it as in a sling; then, by a mighty effort, he swung it stiffly off the bed into the box. 30

He trembled so that he could hardly spread the remaining quilts over the dead face. The box was wide enough to receive the stiff, curved right arm, and he had nothing to do but to nail the cover on, which he did in feverish haste. Then he rose, grasped his tools, rushed outside, slammed the door, and set off in great speed across the snow, pushed on by an indescribable horror.

As he neared home, his fresh young blood asserted itself more and more; but when he entered the cabin he was still trembling, and dropped into a chair like a man out of breath. At sight of the ruddy face of Anson, and with the aid of the heat and light of the familiar little room, he shook off part of his horror.

"Gi' me a cup o' coffee, Ans. I'm kind o' chilly an' tired."

Before drinking he wiped his face and washed his hands again and again at the basin in the corner, as though there were something on them which was ineffably unclean. The little one, who had been weeping again, stared at him with two big tears drying on her hollow cheeks. 31

"Well?" interrogated Anson.

"I nailed her up safe enough for the present. But what're we goin' to do next?"

"I can't see 's we can do anythin' as long as such weather as this lasts. It ain't safe fr one of us to go out an' leave the other alone. Besides, it's thirty below zero, an' no road, Moccasin's full of snow, an' another wind likely to rise at any time. It's mighty tough on this little one, but it can't be helped. As soon as it moderates a little, we'll try to find a woman an' a preacher, an' bury that—relative."

"The only woman I know of is ol' Mrs. Cap Burdon, down on the Third Moccasin, full fifteen miles away."

CHAPTER IV.

FLAXEN ADOPTS ANSON AS "PAP."

For nearly two weeks they waited, while the wind alternately raved and whispered over them as it scurried the snow south or east, or shifted to the south in the night, bringing "the north end of a south wind," the most intolerable and cutting of winds. Day after day the restless snow sifted or leaped across the waste of glittering crust; day after day the sun shone in dazzling splendor, but so white and cold that the thermometer still kept down among the thirties. They were absolutely alone on the plain, except that now and then a desperate wolf or inquisitive owl came by.

These were long days for the settlers. They would have been longer had it not been for little Elga, or "Flaxen," as they took to calling her. They racked their brains to amuse her, and in the intervals of tending the cattle and of cooking, or of washing dishes, rummaged through all their books and pictures, taught her "cat's cradle," played "jack-straws" with her, and with all their resources of song and pantomime strove to fill up the little one's lonely days, happy when they succeeded in making her laugh.

"That settles it!" said Bert one day, whanging the basin back into the empty flour-barrel.

"What's the matter?"

"Matter is, we've reached the bottom o' the flour-barrel, an' it's got to be filled; no two ways about that. We can get along on biscuit an' pancakes in place o' meat, but we can't put anythin' in the place o' bread. If it looks favorable to-morrow, we've got to make a break for Summit an' see if we can't stock up."

Early the next morning they brought out the shivering team and piled into the box all the quilts and robes they had, and bundling little Flaxen in, started across the trackless plain toward the low line of hills to the east, twenty-five or thirty miles. From four o'clock in the morning till nearly noon they toiled across the sod, now ploughing through the deep snow where the unburned grass had held it, now scraping across the bare, burned earth, now wandering up or down the swales, seeking the shallowest places, now shovelling a pathway through.

The sun rose unobscured as usual, and shone down with unusual warmth, which afforded the men the satisfaction of seeing little Flaxen warm and merry. She chattered away in her own tongue, and clapped her little hands in glee at sight of the snowbirds running and fluttering about. As they approached the low hills the swales got deeper and more difficult to cross, but about eleven o'clock they came to Burdon's Ranch, a sort of half-way haven between their own claim and Summit, the end of the railway.

Captain Burdon was away, but Mrs. Burdon, a big, slatternly Missourian, with all the kindness of a universal mother in her swarthy face and flaccid bosom, ushered them into the cave-like dwelling set in the sunny side of Water Moccasin.

"Set down, set right down. Young uns, git out some o' them cheers an' let the strangers set. Purty tol'able tough weather? A feller don't git out much such weather as this 'ere 'thout he's jes' naturally 'bleeged to. Suse, heave in another twist, an' help the little un to take off her shawl."

After Mrs. Burdon's little flurry of hospitality was over, Anson found time to tell briefly the history of the child.

"Heavens to Betsey! I wan' to know!" she cried, her fat hands on her knees and her eyes bulging. "Wal! wal! I declare, it beats the Dutch! So that woman jest frizzed right burside the babe! Wal, I never! An' the ol' man he ain't showed up? Wal, now, he ain't likely to. I reckon I saw that Norsk go by here that very day, an' I says to Cap'n, says I, 'If that feller don't reach home inside an hour, he'll go through heaven a-gittin' home,' says I to the Cap'n."

"Well, now," said Anson, stopping the old woman's garrulous flow, "I've got to be off f'r Summit, but I wish you'd jest look after this little one here till we git back. It's purty hard weather f'r her to be out, an' I don't think she ought to."

"Yaas; leave her, o' course. She'll enjoy playin' with the young uns. I reckon y' did all y' could for that woman. Y' can't burry her now; the ground's like linkum-vity."

But as Anson turned to leave, the little creature sprang up with a torrent of wild words, catching him by the coat, and pleading strenuously to go with him. Her accent was unmistakable.

"You wan' to go with Ans?" he inquired, looking down into the little tearful face with a strange stirring in his bachelor heart. "I believe on my soul she does."

"Sure's y're born!" replied Mrs. Burdon. "She'd rather go with you than to stay an' fool with the young uns; that's what she's tryin' to say."

"Do y' wan' to go?" asked Ans again, opening his arms. She sprang toward him, raising her eager little hands as high as she could, and when he lifted her she twined her arms around his neck.

"Poor little critter! she ain't got no pap ner mam now," the old woman explained to the ring of children, who still stared silently at the stranger almost without moving.

"Ain't he her pa-a-p?" drawled one of the older girls, sticking a finger at Anson.

"He is now," laughed Ans, and that settled the question over which he had been pondering for days. It meant that as long as she wanted to stay she should be his Flaxen and he would be her "pap." "And you can be Uncle Bert, hey?" he said to Bert.

"Good enough," said Bert.

CHAPTER V.

FLAXEN BECOMES INDISPENSABLE TO THE TWO OLD BACHELORS.

They never found any living relative, and only late in the spring was the fate of the poor father revealed. He and his cattle were found side by side in a deep swale, where they had foundered in the night and tempest.

As for little Flaxen, she soon recovered her cheerfulness, with the buoyancy natural to childhood, and learned to prattle in broken English very fast. She developed a sturdy self-reliance that was surprising in one so young, and long before spring came was indispensable to the two "old baches."

"Now, Bert," said Ans one day, "I don't wan' to hear you talk in that slipshod way any longer before Flaxen. You know better; you've had more chance than I have—be'n to school more. They ain't no excuse for you, not an ioty. Now, I'm goin' to say to her, 'Never mind how I talk, but talk like Bert does.'"

"Oh, say, now, look here, Ans, I can't stand the strain. Suppose she'd hear me swearin' at ol' Barney or the stove?"

"That's jest it. You ain't goin' to swear," decided Anson; and after that Bert took the education of the little waif in hand, for he was a man of good education; his use of dialect and slang sprang mainly from carelessness.

But all the little fatherly duties and discipline fell to Anson, and much perplexed he often got. For instance, when he bought her an outfit of American clothing at the store they were strange to her and to him, and the situation was decidedly embarrassing when they came to try them.

"Now, Flaxie, I guess this thing goes on this side before, so's you can button it. If it went on so, you *couldn't* reach around to button it, don't you see? I guess you'd better try it so. An' this thing, I judge, is a shirt, an' goes on under that other thing, which I reckon is called a shimmy. Say, Bert, shouldn't you call that a shirt?" holding up a garment.

"W-e-l-l, yes" (after a close scrutiny). "Yes: I should."

"And this a shimmy?"

"Well, now, you've got me, Ans. It seems to me I've heard the women folks home talk about

shimmies, but they were always kind o' private about it, so I don't think I can help you out. That little thing goes underneath, sure enough."

"All right, here goes, Flax; if it should turn out to be hind side before, no matter."

Then again little Flaxen would want to wear her best dress on week-days, and Ans was unable to explain. Here again Bert came to the rescue.

"Git her one dress fer ev'ry day in the week, an' make her wear 'em in rotation. Hang 'em up an' put a tag on each one—Sunday, Monday, an' so on."

"Good idea."

And it was done. But the embarrassments of attending upon the child soon passed away; she quickly grew independent of such help, dressed herself, and combed her own hair, though Anson enjoyed doing it himself when he could find time, and she helped out not a little about the house. She seemed to have forgotten her old life, awakening as she had from almost deathly torpor into a new home—almost a new world—where a strange language was spoken, where no woman was, and where no mention of her mother, father, or native land was ever made before her. The little waif was at first utterly bewildered, then reconciled, and by the time spring came over the prairie was almost happy in the touching way of a child deprived of childish things.

Oh, how sweet spring seemed to those snow-weary people! Day after day the sun crept higher up in the sky; day after day the snow gave way a little on the swells, and streams of water began to trickle down under the huge banks of snow, filling the ravines; and then at last came a day when a strange, warm wind blew from the northwest. Soft and sweet and sensuous it was, as if it swept some tropic bay filled with a thousand isles—a wind like a vast warm breath blown upon the land. Under its touch the snow did not melt; it vanished. It fled in a single day from the plain to the gullies. Another day, and the gullies were rivers.

It was the "chinook," which old Lambert, the trapper and surveyor, said came from the Pacific Ocean.

The second morning after the chinook began to blow, Anson sprang to his feet from his bunk, and standing erect in the early morning light, yelled: "Hear that?"

"What is it?" asked Bert.

"There! Hear it?" Anson smiled, holding up his hand joyfully as a mellow "Boom—boom—boom" broke through the silent air. "Prairie-chickens! Hurrah! Spring has come! That breaks the back o' winter short off."

"Hurrah! de 'pring ees come!" cried little Flaxen, gleefully clapping her hands in imitation.

No man can know what a warm breeze and the note of a bird can mean to him till he is released, as these men were released, from the bondage of a horrible winter. Perhaps still more moving was the thought that with the spring the loneliness of the prairie would be broken, never again to be so dread and drear; for with the coming of spring came the tide of land-seekers pouring in: teams scurried here and there on the wide prairie, carrying surveyors, land agents, and settlers. At Summit trains came rumbling in by the first of April, emptying thousands of men, women, and children upon the sod, together with cattle, machinery, and household articles, to lie there roofed only by the blue sky. Summit, from being a half-buried store and a blacksmith's shop, bloomed out into a town with saloons, lumber-yards, hotels, and restaurants; the sound of hammer and anvil was incessant, and trains clanged and whistled night and day.

Day after day the settlers got their wagons together and loaded up, and then moved down the slope into the fair valley of the sleepy James. Mrs. Cap Burdon did a rushing business as a hotel-keeper, while Cap sold hay and oats at rates which made the land-seekers gasp.

"I'm not out here f'r my health," was all the explanation he ever made.

Soon all around the little shanty of Anson and Bert other shanties were built and filled with young, hopeful, buoyant souls. The railway surveyors came through, locating a town about three and another about twelve miles away, and straightway the bitter rivalry between Boomtown and Belleplain began. Belleplain being their town, Bert and Anson swore by Belleplain, and correspondingly derided the claims of Boomtown.

With the coming of spring began the fiercest toil of the pioneers—breaking the sod, building, harvesting, ploughing; then the winter again, though not so hard to bear; then the same round of work again. So the land was settled, the sod was turned over; sod shanties gave way to little frame houses; the tide of land-seekers passed on, the boom burst, but the real workers, like Wood and Gearheart, went patiently, steadily on, founding a great State.

A QUESTION OF DRESS.

One morning eight years later Flaxen left the home of Gearheart and Wood with old Doll and the buggy, bound for Belleplain after groceries for harvest. She drove with a dash, her hat on the back of her head. She was seemingly intent on getting all there was possible out of a chew of kerosene gum, which she had resolved to throw away upon entering town, intending to get a new supply.

She had thriven on Western air and gum, and though hardly more than fourteen years of age, her bust and limbs revealed the grace of approaching womanhood, however childish her short dress and braided hair might still show her to be. Her face was large and decidedly of Scandinavian type, fair in spite of wind and sun, and broad at the cheekbones. Her eyes were as blue and clear as winter ice.

As she rode along she sang as well as she could without neglecting the gum, sitting at one end of the seat like a man, the reins held carelessly in her left hand, notwithstanding the swift gait of the horse, who always knew when Flaxen was driving. She met a friend on the road, and said, "Hello!" pulling up her horse with one strong hand.

"Can't stop," she explained; "got to go over to the city to get some groceries for harvest. Goin' to the sociable to-morrow?"

"You bet," replied the friend, "You?"

"I d'know; mebbe, if the boys'll go. Ta-ta; see ye later." And away she spun.

Belleplain had not thriven, or, to be more exact, it had had a rise and fall; and as the rise had been considerable, so the fall was something worth chronicling. It was now a collection of wooden buildings, mostly empty, graying under the storms and suns of pitiless winters and summers, and now, just in mid-summer, surrounded by splendid troops and phalanxes of gorgeous sunflowers, whose brown crowns, gold-dusted, looked ever toward the sun as it swung through the wide arch of cloudless sky. The signs of the empty buildings still remained, and one might still read the melancholy decline from splendours of the past in "emporiums," "palace drug stores," and "mansion-houses."

As Flaxen would have said, "Belleplain's boom had bu'sted." Her glory had gone with the C., B. and Q., which formed the junction at Boomtown and left the luckless citizens of Belleplain "high and dry" on the prairie, with nothing but a "spur" to travel on. However, a few stores yet remained in the midst of desolation.

After making her other purchases, Flaxen entered the "red-front drug store" to secure the special brand of gum which seemed most delectable and to buy a couple of cigars for the "boys."

The clerk, who was lately from the East, and wore his moustache curled upward like the whiskers of a cat, was "gassing" with another young man, who sat in a chair with his heels on the counter.

"Well, my dear, what can I do for you to-day?" he said, winking at the loafer, as if to say, "Now watch me."

"I want some gum."

"What kind, darling?" he asked, encouraged by the fellow in the chair.

"I ain't your darling.—Kerosene, shoofly, an' ten cents' worth."

"Say, Jack," drawled the other fellow, "git onto the ankles! Say, sissy, you picked your dress too soon. She's goin' to be a daisy, first you know. Ain't y', honey?" he said, leaning over and pinching her arm.

"Let me alone, you great, mean thing! I'll tell ol' pap on you, see if I don't," cried Flaxen, her eyes filling with angry tears. And as they proceeded to other and bolder remarks she rushed out, feeling vaguely the degradation of being so spoken to and so touched. It seemed to become more atrocious the more she thought upon it.

When she reached home there were still signs of tears on her face, and when Anson came out to help her alight, and noticing it asked, "What's the matter?" she burst out afresh, crying, and talking incoherently. Anson was astonished.

"Why, what's the matter, Flaxie? Can't you tell ol' pap? Are ye sick?"

She shook her head, and rushed past him into the house and into her bedroom, like a little cyclone of wrath. Ans slowly followed her, much perplexed. She was lying face downward on

the bed, sobbing.

"What's the matter, little one? Can't y' tell ol' pap? Have the girls be'n makin' fun o' yeh again?"

She shook her head.

"Have the boys be'n botherin' yeh?" No reply. "Who was it?" Still silence. He was getting stern now. "Tell me right now."

"Jack Reeves—an'—an' another feller."

"Wha' d' they do?" Silence. "Tell me."

"They—pinched me, an'—an'—talked mean to me," she replied, breaking down again with the memory of the insult.

Anson began to understand.

"Wal, there! You dry y'r eyes, Flaxie, an' go an' git supper; they won't do it again—not *this* harvest," he added grimly as he marched to the door to enter the buggy.

Bert, coming along from the barn and seeing Anson about to drive away, asked where he was going. Anson tried to look indifferent.

"Oh, I've got a little business to transact with Reeves and some other smart Aleck downtown."

"What's up? What have they be'n doing?" asked Gearheart, reading trouble in the eyes of his friend.

"Well, they have be'n a little too fresh with Flaxen to-day, an' need a lesson."

"They're equal to it. Say, Anson, let me go," laying his hand on the dasher, ready to leap in.

"No: you're too brash. You wouldn't know when to quit. No: you stay right here. Don't say anything to Flaxen about it; if she wants to know where I'm gone, tell her I found I was out o' nails."

As Anson drove along swiftly he was in a savage mood and thinking deeply. Two or three times of late some of his friends had touched rather freely upon the fact that Flaxen was becoming a woman. "Girls ripen early out in this climate," one old chap had said, "and your little Norsk there is likely to leave you one of these days." He felt now that something deliberately and inexpressibly offensive had been said and done to his little girl. He didn't want to know just what it was, but just who did it; that was all. It was time to make a protest.

Hitching his horse to a ring in the sidewalk upon arrival, he walked into the drug store, which was also the post-office. Young Reeves was inside the post-office corner giving out the mail, and Anson sauntered about the store waiting his chance.

He was a dangerous-looking man just now. Ordinarily his vast frame, huge, grizzled beard, and stern, steady eyes would quell a panther; but now as he leaned against the counter a shrewd observer would have said, "Lookout for him; he's dangerous."

His gray shirt, loose at the throat, showed a neck that resembled the spreading base of an oak tree, and his crossed limbs and half-recumbent pose formed a curious opposition to the look in his eyes.

Nobody noticed him specially. Most comers and goers, being occupied with their mail, merely nodded and passed on.

Finally some one called for a cigar, and Reeves, having finished in the post-office department, came jauntily along behind the counter directly to where Anson stood. As he looked casually into the giant's eyes he started back, but too late; one vast hand had clutched him by the collar, and he was jerked over the counter and cuffed from hand to hand, like a mouse in the paws of a cat. Though Ans used his open palm, the punishment was fearful. Blood burst from his victim's nose and mouth; he yelled with fright and pain.

The rest rushed to help.

"Stand back! This is a private affair," said Ans, throwing up a warning hand. They paused; all knew his strength.

"It wasn't me!" screamed Reeves as the punishment increased; "it was Doc Coe."

Coe, his hands full of papers and letters, horrified at what had overtaken Reeves, stood looking on. But now he tried to escape. Flinging the battered, half-senseless Reeves back

over the counter, where he lay in a heap, Anson caught Coe by the coat just as he was rushing past him, and duplicated the punishment, ending by kicking him into the street, where he lay stunned and helpless. Ans said then, in a voice that the rest heard, "The next time you insult a girl, you'd better inquire into the qualities of her gardeen."

This little matter attended to, he unhitched his horse from the sidewalk, and refusing to answer any questions, rode off home, outwardly as calm as though he had just been shaking hands.

Supper was about ready when he drove up, and through the open door he could see the white-covered table and could hear the cheerful clatter of dishes. Flaxen was whistling. Eight years of hard work had not done much for these sturdy souls, but they had managed to secure with incredible toil a comfortable little house surrounded with outbuildings. Calves and chickens gave life to the barn-yard, and fields of wheat rippled and ran with swash of heavy-bearded heads and dapple of shadow and sheen.

Flaxen was now the housewife and daughter of these hard-working pioneers, and a cheery and capable one she had become. No one had ever turned up with a better claim to her, and so she had grown up with Ans and Bert, going to school when she could spare the time, but mainly being adviser and associate at the farm.

Ans and Bert had worked hard winter and summer trying to get ahead, but had not succeeded as they had hoped. Crops had failed for three or four years, and money was scarce with them; but they had managed to build this small frame house and to get a little stock about them, and this year, with a good crop, would "swing clear," and be able to do something for Flaxen—perhaps send her to Belleplain to school, togged out like a little queen.

When Anson returned to the house after putting out the horse, he found Bert reading the paper in the little sitting-room and Flaxen putting the tea on the stove.

"Wha' d' y' do to him, pap?" laughed she, all her anger gone. Bert came out to listen.

"Oh, nothin' p'tic'lar," answered Ans, flinging his hat at a chicken that made as though to come in, and rolling up his sleeves preparatory to sozzling his face at the sink. "I jest cuffed 'em a little, an' let 'em go."

"Is that all?" said Flaxen, disappointedly, a comical look on her round face.

"Now, don't you worry," put in Bert. "Anson's cuffin' a man is rather severe experience. I saw him cuff a man once; it ain't anythin' to be desired a second time."

They all drew about the table. Flaxen looked very womanly as she sat cutting the bread and pouring the tea. She had always been old in her ways about the house, for she had very early assumed the housewife's duties and cares. Her fresh-coloured face beamed with delight as she watched the hungry men devouring the fried pork, potatoes, and cheese.

"When y' goin' to begin cuttin', boys?" Collectively they were boys to her, but when addressing them separately they were "Bert" and "Pap."

"To-morrow 'r nex' day, I guess," answered Anson, looking out of the open door. "Don't it look fine—all yellin' an' green? I tell ye they ain't anything lays over a ripe field o' wheat in my eyes. You jest take it when the sun strikes it right, an' the wind is playin' on it—when it kind o' sloshes around like water—an' the clouds go over it, droppin' shadders down on it, an' a hawk kind o' goes skimmin' over it, divin' into it once in a while—"

He did not finish; it was not necessary.

"Yes, sir!" adjudged Gearheart, after a pause, leaning his elbows on the table and looking out of the door on the far-stretching, sun-glorified plain.

"The harvest kind o' justifies the winter we have out here. That is, when we have a harvest such as this. Fact is, we fellers live six months o' the year lookin' ahead to harvest, an' t'other six months lookin' back to it. Well, this won't buy the woman a dress, Ans. We must get that header set up to-night if we can."

They pushed their chairs back noisily and rose to go out. Flaxen said:

"Say, which o' you boys is goin' to help me churn to-night?"

Anson groaned, while she laughed.

"I don't know, Flax; ask us an easier one."

"We'll attend to that after it gets too dark to work on the machine," added Bert.

"Well, see 't y' do. I can't do it; I've got bread to mix an' a chicken to dress. Say, if you don't begin cuttin' till day after to-morrow, we can go down to the sociable to-morrow night."

Last one o' the season."

"I wish it was the last one before the kingdom come," growled Bert as he "stomped" out the door. "They're a bad lot. The idea o' takin' down four dollars' worth o' grub an' then payin' four dollars for the privilege of eatin' half of it! I'll take my chicken here, when I'm hungry."

"Bert ain't partial to sociables, is he, pap?" laughed Flaxen.

"I should hate to have the minister dependin' on Bert for a livin'."

"Sa-ay, pap!"

"Wal, babe?"

"I expect I'll haf t' have a new dress one o' these days."

"Think so?"

"You bet."

"Why, what's the matter with the one y' got on? Ain't no holes in it that I can see," looking at it carefully and turning her around as if she were on a pivot.

"Well, ain't it purty short, pap?" she said suggestively.

"I swear, I don't know but it is," conceded Anson, scratching his head; "I hadn't paid much tention to it before. It certainly is a lee-tle too short. Lemme see: ain't no way o' lettin' it down, is they?"

"Nary. She's clean down to the last notch now," replied Flaxen convincingly.

"Couldn't pull through till we thrash?" he continued, still in a tentative manner.

"Could, but don't like to," she answered, laughing again, and showing her white teeth pleasantly.

"I s'pose it'll cost suthin'," he insinuated in a dubious tone.

"Mattie Stuart paid seven dollars fer her'n, pap, an' I—"

"Seven how manys?"

"Dollars, pap, makin' an' everythin'. An' then I ought to have a new hat to go with the dress, an' a new pair o' shoes. All the girls are wearin' white, but I reckon I can git along with a good coloured one that'll do fer winter."

"Wal, all right. I'll fix it—some way," Ans said, turning away only to look back and smile to see her dancing up and down and crying:

"Oh, goody, goody!"

"I'll do it if I haf to borrow money at two per cent a month," said he to Bert, as he explained the case. "Hear her sing! Why, dern it! I'd spend all I've got to keep that child twitterin' like that. Wouldn't you, eh?"

Bert was silent, thinking deeply on a variety of matters suggested by Anson's words. The crickets were singing from out the weeds near by; a lost little wild chicken was whistling in plaintive sweetness down in the barley-field; the flaming light from the half-sunk sun swept along the green and yellow grain, glorifying as with a bath of gold everything it touched.

"I wish that grain hadn't ripened so fast, Ans. It's blightin'."

"Think so?"

"No: I know it. I went out to look at it before supper, an' every one of those spots that look so pretty are just simply burnin' up! But, say, ain't it a little singular that Flaxen should blossom out in a desire for a new dress all at once? Ain't it rather sudden?"

"Wal, no: I don't think it is. Come to look it all over, up one side an' down the other, she's been growin' about an inch a month this summer, an' her best dress is gittin' turrrible short the best way you can fix it. She's gittin' to be 'most a woman, Bert."

"Yes: I know she is," said Bert, significantly. "An' something's got to be done right off."

"Wha' d' ye mean by that, ol' man?"

"I mean jest this. It's time we did something religious for that girl. She ain't had much chance since she's been here with us. She ain't had no chance at all. Now I move that we

send her away to school this winter. Give her a good outfit an' send her away. This ain't no sort o' way for a girl to grow up in."

"Wal, I've be'n thinkin' o' that myself; but where'll we send her?"

"Oh, back to the States somewhere; Wisconsin or Minnesota—somewhere."

"Why not to Boomtown?"

"Well, I'll tell yeh, Ans. I've been hearing a good 'eal off an' on about the way we're bringin' her up here 'alone with two rough old codgers,' an' I jest want to give her a better chance than the Territory affords. I want her to git free of us and all like us, for a while; let her see something of the world. Besides, that business over in Belleplain to-day kind o' settled me. The plain facts are, Ans, the people are a little too free with her because she is growin' up here—"

"I know some fellers that won't be again."

"Well, they are beginnin' to wink an' nudge each other an' to say—"

"Go on! What do they say?"

"They say she's goin' to be a woman soon; that this fatherly business is bound to play out."

"I'd like to see anybody wink when I'm around. I'd smash 'em!" said Anson through his set teeth. "Why, she's our little babe," he broke out, as the full significance of the matter came to him. "My little un; I'm her ol' pap. Why—" He ended in despair. "It's none o' their darn business."

"There ain't no use o' howlin', Ans. You can't smash a whole neighborhood."

"But what are we goin' to do?"

"Well, I'll tell ye what we mustn't do. We mustn't tog her out jest yet."

"Why not?" asked Anson, not seeing these subtle distinctions of time and place.

"Because, you tog her out this week or next, without any apparent reason, in a new hat an' dress an' gloves, an' go down to one o' these sociables with her, an' you'd have to clean out the whole crowd. They'd all be winkin' an' nudgin' an' grinnin'—see?"

"Wal, go on," said the crushed giant. "What'll we do?"

"Just let things go on as they are for the present till we git ready to send her to school."

"But I promised the togs."

"All right. I've stated the case," Gearheart returned, with the air of a man who washed his hands of the whole affair.

Anson rose with a sudden gesture. "Jest hear her! whistlin' away like a lark. I don't see how I'm goin' to go in there an' spoil all her fun; I can't do it, that's all."

"Well, now, you leave it all to me. I'll state the case to her in a way that'll catch her—see if I don't. She ain't no common girl."

It was growing dark as they went in, and the girl's face could not be seen.

"Well, Bert, are y' ready to help churn?"

"Yes, I guess so, if Ans'll milk."

"Oh, he'll milk; he jest loves to milk ol' Brindle when the flies are thick."

"Oh, you bet," said Ans, to make her laugh.

"Now, Flaxen," coughed Gearheart in beginning, "we've been discussin' your case, an' we've come to the conclusion that you ought to have the togs specified in the indictment" (this to take away the gravity of what was to follow); "but we're kind o' up a tree about just what we'd better do. The case is this. We've got to buy a horse to fill out our team, an' that's a-goin' to take about all we can rake an' scrape."

"We may have to git our groceries on tick. Now, if you could only pull through till after—" Anson broke in.

"It's purty tough, Flaxie, an' pap's awful sorry; but if you could jest pull through—"

It was a great blow to poor little Flaxen, and she broke down and cried unrestrainedly.

"I—I—don't see why I can't have things like the rest o' the girls." It was her first reproach, and it cut to the heart. Anson swore under his breath, and was stepping forward to say something when Gearheart restrained him.

"But, y' see, Flaxie, we ain't askin' you to give up the dress, only to wait on us for a month or so, till we thrash."

"That's it, babe," said Anson, going over to where she sat, with her arms lying on the table and her face hidden upon them. "We could spend dollars then where we couldn't cents now."

"And they won't be any more thingumyjigs at the church, anyhow, an' the wheat's blightin' on the knolls, besides."

But the first keen disappointment over, she was her brave self once more.

"Well, all right, boys," she said, her trembling voice curiously at variance with her words; "I'll get along somehow, but I tell you I'll have something scrumptious to pay for this—see if I don't." She was smiling again faintly, "It'll cost more'n *one* ten dollars for my togs, as you call 'em. Now, pap, you go an' milk that cow! An', Bert, you glue yerself to that churn-dasher, an' don't you stop to breathe or swear till it's done."

"That's the girl to have—that's our own Flaxie! She knows how hard things come on a farm," cheered Anson.

"I bet I do," she said, wiping away the last trace of her tears and smiling at her palpable hit. And then began the thump of the dasher, and out in the dusk Anson was whistling as he milked.

She went down to the sociable the next night in her old dress, and bravely looked happy for pap's sake. Bert did not go. Anson was a rather handsome old fellow. Huge, bearded like a Russian, though the colour of his beard was a wolf brindle, resembling a bunch of dry buffalo-grass, Bert was accustomed to say that he looked the father of the girl, for she had the same robust development, carried herself as erect, and looked everybody in the eye with the same laughing directness.

There were some sly remarks among a ribald few, but on the whole everything passed off as usual. They were both general favorites, and as a matter of fact few people remarked that Flaxen's dress was not good enough. She certainly forgot all about it, so complete was her absorption in the gayety of the evening.

"Wal, now for four weeks' hard times, Flaxen," said Anson, as they were jogging homeward about eleven o'clock.

"I can stand *my* share of it, pap," she stoutly replied. "I'm no chicken."

CHAPTER VII.

AFTER HARVEST.

All through those four or five weeks, at every opportunity, the partners planned the future of their waif. In the harvest-field, when they had a moment together, one would say to the other:

"We'll let her stay two years if she likes it, eh?"

"Certainly; she needn't come back till she wants to. We may be rich enough to sell out then, and move back ourselves. I'm gittin' tired o' this prairie myself. If we could sell, we'd put her through a whole course o' sprouts."

"You bet! Sell when you can find a buyer. I'll sign the deed."

"All right."

And then they would go to work again toiling and planning for the future. Every day during August these men worked with the energy of demons, up early in the morning and out late at night, harvesting their crop. All day the header clattered to and fro with Bert or Ans astride the rudder, a cloud of dust rolling up from the ground, out of which the painted flanges of the reel flashed like sword-strokes. All day, and day after day; while the gulls sailed and soared in the hazy air and the larks piped from the dun grass, these human beings, covered with grime and sweat, worked in heat and parching wind. And never for an hour did they forget their little waif and her needs. And she did her part in the house. She rose as early as they and worked almost as late. It was miraculous, they admitted.

One night toward the last of the harvest they were returning along the road from a neighboring farm, where they had been to head some late wheat. The tired horses with down-hung heads and swinging traces were walking sullenly but swiftly along the homeward road, the wagon rumbling sleepily; the stars were coming out in the east, while yet the rose and amethyst of the fallen sun lighted the western sky. Through the air, growing moist, came the sound of reapers still going. Men were shouting blithely, while voices of women and children came from the cabins, where yellow lights began to twinkle.

Anson and Bert, blackened with dust and perspiration and weary to the point of listlessness, sat with elbows on knees, talking in low, slow tones on the never-failing topic, crops and profits. Their voices chimed with the sound of the wagon.

"There's the light," broke out Ans, rousing himself and the team; "Flaxen's got supper all ready for us. She's a regular little Trojan, that girl is. They ain't many girls o' fourteen that 'u'd stay there contented all day alone an' keep all the whole business in apple-pie order. She'll get her pay some day."

"We'll try to pay her; but say, ol' man, ain't it about time to open up our plans to her?"

"Wal, yes; it is. You kind o' start the thing to-night, an' we'll have it over with."

As they drove up, Flaxen came to the door. "Hello, boys! What makes ye so late?"

"Finishin' up a field, babe. All done."

She clapped her hands and danced up and down.

"Goody! all done at last. Well, yank them horses out o' their harnesses an' come to biscuits. They're jest sizzlin' hot."

"All right. We'll be there in about two jerks of a lamb's tail in fly-time. Bert, grab a tug; I'm hungry as a wolf."

It was about the first of September and the nights were getting cool, and the steaming supper seemed like a feast to the chilled and stiffened men coming in a little later and sitting down with the sound of the girl's cheery voice in their ears. The tea was hot; so were the biscuits. The pyramid of hot mashed potato had a lump of half-melted butter in the hollow top, and there were canned peaches and canned salmon.

"Yes: we're about finished up harvestin'," said Bert, as they settled themselves at the table, "an' it's about time to talk about gittin' you off to school."

"Don't worry about that. It ain't no great job, I reckon. I can git ready in about seventeen jiffies, stop-watch time."

"Not if you are goin' away off to some city in the East—"

"Yes: but I ain't, y' see."

"Oh, yes, you are. Bert an' I've be'n talkin' it all over f'r the last three weeks. We're goin' to send you back to St. Peter to the seminary."

"I guess not, pap. I'd like to know what you think you're a-doin' sendin' me 'way back there. Boomtown's good enough fer me."

"There, there, Flaxie; don't git mad. Y' see, we think they ain't anythin' good enough for you. Nothin' too good for a girl that stays to home an' cooks f'r two old cusses—"

"You ain't cusses! You're jest as good as you can be; but I ain't a-goin'—there!"

"Why not?"

"'Cause I ain't; that's why."

"Why, don't y' wan' to go back there where the people have nice houses, an' where they's a good—"

"Well, I don't know enough; that's why. I ain't goin' back to no seminary to be laughed at 'cause I don't know beans."

"But you do," laughed Bert, with an attempt to lighten the gloom—"you know canned beans."

"They'd laff at me, I know, an' call me a little Norsk." She was ready to cry.

"I'll bet they won't, not when they see our new dress an' our new gold watch—dress jest the color o' crow's-foot grass, watch thirty carats fine. I'd laugh to see 'em callin' my babe names then!"

And so by bribing, coaxing, and lying they finally obtained her tearful consent. They might not have succeeded even then had it not been for a young lady in Boomtown who was going back to the same school, and who offered to take her in charge. But there was hardly a day that she did not fling herself down into a chair and cry out:

"I jest ain't goin'. I'm all right here, an' I don't see why you can't let me stay here. I ain't made no fuss. Seems as if you thought it was fun f'r me to go 'way off there where I don't know anythin' an' where I don't know anybody."

But having come to a conclusion, the men were relentless. They hired sewing-girls, and skirmished back and forth between Boomtown and the farm like mad. Their steady zeal made up for her moody and fitful enthusiasm. However, she grew more resigned to the idea as the days wore on toward the departure, though her fits of dark and unusual musing were alarming to Anson, who feared a desperate retreat at the last moment.

He took her over to see Miss Holt one day, but not before he had prepared the way.

"I s'pose things are in purty good shape around this seminary?" he asked.

"Oh, yes, indeed. There are three large buildings; libraries, picture-galleries, and music-rooms. The boarding-halls are carpeted and the parlors are really elegant."

"Uh-hum!" commented Anson. "Well, now, I'm goin' to bring my girl over to see you, an' I guess it 'u'd be jest as well if you didn't mention these fineries an' things. Y' see, she's afraid of all such things. It 'u'd be better to tell her that things weren't very gorgeous there—about like the graded school in Boomtown, say. She ain't used to these music-halls an' things. Kind o' make her think St. Peter ain't no great shakes, anyhow."

"I see," laughed the quick-witted girl. And she succeeded in removing a good deal of Flaxen's dread of the seminary.

"Wal, babe, to-morrow," said Anson, as they were eating supper, and he was astonished to see her break out in weeping.

"Why don't you keep harpin' away on that the whole while?" she exclaimed. "Can't you leave me alone a minute? Seems to me you're jest crazy to git rid o' me."

"Oh, we are," put in Bert. "We're jest lickin' our chops to git back to sour flapjacks an' soggy bread. Jest seems as though we couldn't wait till to-morrow noon, to begin doing our own cookin' again."

This cleared the air a little, and they spent the rest of the evening without saying very much directly upon the departure. The two men sat up late after Flaxen had gone to bed. There was the trunk and valise which would not let them forget even for a moment what was coming on the morrow. Every time Anson looked at her he sighed and tried to swallow the lump in his throat.

"Say, Bert, let's let her stay if she wants to," he said suddenly after they had been in silence for a long time.

"Don't make a cussed fool of yourself, Ans," growled Bert, who saw that heroic measures were necessary. "Go to bed an' don't you say another word; we've got to take our medicine like men."

CHAPTER VIII.

AN EMPTY HOUSE.

Anson was the more talkative of the two next morning, however.

"Come, come, brace up, babe! Anybody 'u'd think we'd lost all the rest of our family, when we're only doin' the square thing by our daughter. That's all. Why, you'll be as happy as a canary in less'n two weeks. Young folks is about the same everywhere, an' you'll git acquainted in less'n two jiffies."

They were on the road to Boomtown to put Flaxen on the train. It was about the tenth of September, early in the cold, crisp air of a perfect morning. In the south there was a vast phantom lake, with duplicate cities here and there along the winding shores, which stretched from east to west. The grain-stacks stood around so thickly that they seemed like walls of a great, low-built town, the mirage bringing into vision countless hundreds of them commonly below the horizon.

The smoke of steam threshing-machines mounted into the still air here and there, and hung long in a slowly drifting cloud above the land. The prairie-lark, the last of the singing birds, whistled softly and infrequently from the dry grass. The gulls were streaming south from the lakes.

They were driving her to Boomtown to avoid the inquisitive eyes of the good people of Belleplain. "I may break down an' blubber," said Anson to Bert; "an' if I do, I don't want them cussed idiots standin' around laughin'—it's better to go on the C., B. and Q., anyhow."

Notwithstanding his struggle to keep talk going, Anson was unsuccessful from the very moment that Belleplain faded to an unsubstantial group of shadows and disappeared from the level plain into the air, just as Boomtown correspondingly wavered into sight ahead. Silence so profound was a restraint on them all, and poor Flaxen with wide eyes looked wistfully on the plain that stretched away into unknown regions. She was thinking of her poor mother, whom she dimly remembered in the horror of that first winter. Naturally of a gay, buoyant disposition, she had not dwelt much upon her future or her past; but now that the familiar plain seemed slipping from her sight entirely, she was conscious of its beauty, and, rapt with the associated emotions which came crowding upon her, she felt as though she were leaving the tried and true for the unknown and uncertain.

"Boys," she said finally, "do you s'pose I've got any folks?"

"I shouldn't wonder if y' had, babe, somewhere back in the ol' country."

"They couldn't talk with me if I could find 'em, could they?"

"I reckon not, 'less you study so hard that you can learn their lingo," said Ans, seeing another opportunity to add a reason for going to school.

"Well, boys, that's what I'm goin' to do, an' by an' by we'll go over there an' see if we can't find 'em, won't we?"

"That's the talk; now you're gittin' down to business," rejoined Ans.

"I s'pose St. Peter is a good 'eal bigger'n Boomtown," she said sighfully, as they neared the "emporium of the sleepy James."

"A little," said the astute Gearheart.

The clanging of the engines and the noise of shouting gave her a sinking sensation in the chest, and she clung to Anson's arm as they drove past the engine. She was deafened by the hiss of the escaping steam of the monster standing motionless, headed toward the east, ready to leap on its sounding way.

On the platform they found Miss Holt and a number of other friends waiting. There was a great deal of clanging and whanging and scuffling, it seemed to the poor, overwrought girl. Miss Holt took her in charge at once and tried to keep her cheerful. When they had checked her trunk and the train was about ready to start, Ans looked uneasy and fidgeted about. Bert looked on, silent and dark. Flaxen, with her new long dress and new hat, looked quite the woman, and Miss Holt greeted her as such; indeed, she kept so close to her that Anson looked in vain for a chance to say something more which was on his mind. Finally, as the train was about going, he said hesitatingly:

"Elga, jest a minute." She stared for a moment, then came up to him.

"I didn't want to call y' Flaxen afore her," he explained; "but you—ain't—kissed us good-bye." He ended hesitatingly.

The tears were already streaming down her cheeks, and this was too much. She flung her arms about his neck and sobbed on his bosom with the abandon of girlish grief.

"I don't wan' to go 't all, pap."

"Oh, yes, y' do, Elga; yes; y' do! Don't mind us; we'll be all right. I'll have Bert writin' a full half the time. There, kiss me good-bye an' git on—Bert here, too."

She kissed him twice through his bristling moustache, and going to Bert offered her lips, and then came back to Anson and threw herself against his broad, strong breast. She had no one to love but these two. It seemed as if she were leaving everything in the world. Anson took her on his firm arm and helped her on the car, and followed her till she was seated beside Miss Holt.

"Don't cry, babe; you'll make ol' pap feel turrible. He'll break right down here afore all these people, an' blubber, if y' don't cheer up. Why, you'll soon be as happy as a fly in soup. Good-bye, good-bye!"

The train started, and Anson, brushing his eyes with his great brown hand, swung himself off and stood looking at her. As the train passed him she rushed to the rear end of the car,

and remained there looking back at the little station till the sympathetic Miss Holt gently led her back to her seat. Then she flattened her round cheek against the pane and tried to see the boys. When the last house of the town passed by her window she sank back in her seat and sobbed silently.

"I feel as if I'd be'n attendin' my own funeral," said Anson, after they had got into their wagon and the train had gone out of sight in the haze of the prairie.

"Well, it's pretty tough on that child to go off that way. To her the world is all a great mystery. When you an' I go to heaven it won't be any greater change for us than this change for Flaxen—every face strange, every spot new."

"Wal, she ain't far away but we can look out for her. She ain't poor n'r fatherless as long as we live, hey?"

And then silence fell on them. As they were jogging homeward they saw the gray gulls rise from the sod and go home to the lake for the night. They heard the crickets' evening chorus broaden and deepen to an endless and monotonous symphony, while behind fantastic, thin, and rainless clouds the sun sank in unspeakable glory of colour. The air, perfectly still, was cool almost to frostiness, and, far above, the fair stars broke from the lilac and gold of the sun-flushed sky. Lights in the farm-houses began to appear.

Once or twice Anson said: "She's about at Summit now. I hope she's chirked up."

They met threshing-crews going noisily home to supper. Once they met an "outfit," engine, tank, separator, all moving along like a train of cars, while every few minutes the red light from the furnace gleamed on the man who was stuffing the straw into the furnace-door, bringing out his face so plainly that they knew him. As the night grew deeper, an occasional owl flapped across the fields in search of mice.

"We're bound to miss her like thunder, Bert; no two ways about that. Can't help but miss her on the cookin', hey?"

Bert nodded without looking up. As they came in sight of home at last, and saw the house silhouetted against the faintly yellow sky, Ans said with a sigh:

"No light an' no singin' there to-night."

CHAPTER IX.

"BACHING" IT AGAIN.

"**T**he fact is, Flaxen has sp'iled us," laughed Anson, a couple of days later, when Bert was cursing the soggy biscuit. "We've got so high-toned that we can't stand common cookin'. Time was we'd 'a' thought ourselves lucky to git as good as that. Rec'lect them flapjacks we ust to make? By mighty! you could shoe a horse with 'em. Say, I wish I could jest slip in an' see what she's a-doin' about now, hey?"

"She's probably writin' a letter. She won't do much of anythin' else for the first week."

"I hope you're right," said Anson.

They got a queer little letter every Wednesday, each one for several weeks pitifully like the others.

Dear boys i thought i would take my pen in hand to tell you i dont like it one bit the school is just as mene as it can be the girls do laugh at me they call me toe-head. if i catch em right i will fix their heads. They is one girl who i like she is from pipestone she dont know no moren i do she says my dress is pritty—ol nig an the drake all rite i wish i was home.

ELGA.

The wish to be home was in all these letters like a sob. The men read them over carefully and gravely, and finally Anson would put them away in the Bible (bought on Flaxen's account) for safe-keeping.

As the letters improved in form their exultation increased.

"Say, Bert, don't you notice she writes better now? She makes big I's now in place o' little

ones. Seems 's if she runs the sentence all together, though."

"She'll come out all right. You see, she goes into the preparatory department, where they teach writin' an' spellin'. You'll see her hand improve right along now."

And it did, and she ceased to wail for home and ceased to say that she hated her studies.

"I am getting along splendid," she wrote some weeks after this. "I like my teacher; her name is Holt. She is just as nice as she can be. She is cousin to the one who came with me; I live with her uncle, and I can go to soshibles whenever I want to; but the other girls cant. I am feeling pretty good, but I wish you boys was here."

She did not wish to be at home this time!

Winter shut down on the broad land again with that implacable, remorseless brilliancy of fierce cold which characterises the northern plain, stopping work on the farm and bolting all doors. Hardly a day that the sun did not shine; but the light was hard, white, glittering, and cold, the winds treacherous, the snow wild and restless. There was now comparatively little danger of being lost even in the fiercest storms, but still life in one of these little cabins had an isolation almost as terrible as that of a ship wedged amid the ice-floes of the polar regions.

Day after day rising to feed the cattle, night after night bending over the sooty stove listening to the ceaseless voice of the wind as it beat and brushed, whispered, moaned, and piped or screamed around the windows and eaves—this was their life, varied with an occasional visit to the store or the post-office, or by the call of a neighbour. It is easy to conceive that Flaxen's bright letters were like bursts of bird-song in their loneliness. Many of the young men, their neighbours, went back East to spend the winter—back to Michigan, Iowa, New York, or elsewhere.

"Ans, why don't you go back an' visit your folks?" asked Bert, one day. "I'll take care o' things."

"Wal, the fact is, I've be'n away so long they don't care whether I'm alive er dead. I ain't got no near relatives except a sister, an' she's got all the fam'ly she can 'tend to."

"Same here. We ain't very affectionate, anyway; our fam'ly and I don't write. Still I'd like to go back, just to see how they all are."

"Why not go?"

"Well, I don't know. I guess I must one o' these days. I've kind o' be'n waitin' till we got into a little better shape. I hate to go back poor."

"So do I. It's hard work f'r me to give up beat; I ain't goin' to do it yet awhile."

Sometimes a neighbour dropped in during the middle of the day, and on pleasant days they would harness up the team and take a drive down to the store and the post-office; but mainly they vegetated like a couple of huge potatoes in a cellar, as did most of the settlers. There was nothing else to do.

It was the worst winter since the first that they had spent in the country. The snow seemed never still. It slid, streamed, rose in the air ceaselessly; it covered the hay, drifted up the barn door, swept the fields bare, and, carrying the dirt of the ploughed fields with it, built huge black drifts wherever there was a wind-break, corn-field, or other obstruction.

There were moments when Bert was well-nigh desperate. Only contact with hard work and cold winds saved him. He was naturally a more ambitious, more austere man than Anson. He was not content to vegetate, but longed to escape. He felt that he was wasting his life.

It was in December that the letter first came from Flaxen which mentioned Will Kendall.

O boys! I had the best time. We had a party at our house and lots of boys came and girls too, and they were nice, the boys, I mean. Will Kendall he is the nicest feller you ever seen. He has got black eyes and brown hair and a gold watch-chain with a locket with some girl's hair in it, and he said it was his sister's hair, but I told him I didn't believe it, do you? We had cake and popcorn and lasses candy; and Will he took me out to supper.

Bert was reading the letter, and at this point he stopped and raised his eyes, and the two men gazed at each other without a word for a long time. Then Anson laughed.

"She's gittin' over her homesickness. She's all right now she's got out to a sociable."

After that there was hardly a letter that did not mention Kendall in some innocent fashion among the other boys and girls who took part in the sleigh-rides, parties, and sociables. But

the morbidly acute Bert, if he saw, said nothing, and Anson did not see.

"Who d' y' s'pose this Kendall is?" asked Anson, one night late in the winter, of Gearheart, who was reading the paper while his companion reread a letter from Flaxen. "Seems to me she's writin' a good 'eal about him lately."

"Oh, some slick little dry-goods clerk or druggist," said Bert, with unwarrantable irritation.

"She seems to have a good 'eal to say about him, anyway," repeated Anson, in a meditative way.

"Oh, that's natural enough. They are two young folks together," replied Bert, with a careless accent, to remove any suspicion which his hasty utterance might have raised in Anson's mind. 93

"Wal, I guess you're right," agreed Anson, after a pause, relieved. This relief was made complete when in other letters which came she said less and less about Kendall. If they had been more experienced, they would have been disturbed by this suspicious fact.

Then again, when Anson wrote asking "What has become of that Kendall you wrote so much about?" she replied that he was there, and began writing of him again in a careless sort of way, with the craft of woman already manifest in the change of front.

Spring came again, and that ever-recurring miracle, the good green grass, sprang forth from its covering of ice and snow, up from its hiding-place in the dark, cold sod.

Again the two men set to work ferociously at the seeding. Up early in the wide, sweet dawn, toiling through the day behind harrow and seeder, coming in at noon to a poor and badly cooked meal, hurrying back to the field and working till night, coming in at sundown so tired that one leg could hardly be dragged by the other—this was their daily life. 94

One day, as they were eating their supper of sour bread and canned beans, Gearheart irritably broke out: "Ans, why don't you git married? It 'u'd simplify matters a good 'eal if you should. 'Old Russ' is no good."

"What's the matter with *your* gittin' married?" replied Anson, imperturbably pinching off the cooked part of the loaf, skilfully leaving the doughy part.

"I ain't on the marry; that's all."

"Neither am I."

"Well, you ought to be."

"Don't see it."

"Well, now, let me show it. We can't go on this way. I'm gittin' so poor you can count my ribs through my shirt. Jest think how comfortable it would make things! No more awful coffee; no more canned baked beans; no more cussed, infernal, everlastin', leathery flapjacks; no more soggy bread—confound it!" Here he seized the round inner part of the loaf, from which the crust had been flaked, and flung it through the open door far down toward the garden. 95

"Bert! that's the last bit of bread we've got in the house."

"What's the odds? We couldn't eat it."

"We could 'a' baked it over."

"We *could* eat dog, but we don't," replied Bert gloomily. His temper was getting frightful of late.

"We'll be all right when Flaxen comes back," said Ans, laughing.

"Say, now, you've said that a thousand times this winter. You know well enough Flaxen's out o' this. We ain't countin' on her," blurted Gearheart, just in the mood to say disagreeable things.

"Wha' d' y' mean? Ain't she comin' back in June?"

"Probably; but she won't stay."

"No: that's so. She'll have to go back in September; but that's three months, an' we may sell out by that time if we have a good crop. Anyway, we'll live high fer a spell. We ought to have a letter from her to-night, hadn't we?" 96

"I'm goin' down to see, if you'll wash the dishes."

"All right. Take a horse."

"No: the horses are tired. I'll foot it."

"Wal, ain't you too?"

"Want anythin' from the store?"

"Yes: git a hunk o' bacon an' some canned corn, tomatoes, an' some canned salmon; if y' think we can stand the pressure, bring home a can o' peaches."

And so Gearheart started off for town in the dusk, afoot, in order to spare the horse, as though he had not himself walked all day long in the soft, muddy ground. The wind was soft and moist, and the light of the stars coming out in the east fell upon his upturned eyes with unspeakable majesty. Yet he saw them but dimly. He was dreaming of a face which was often in his mind now—a face not unlike Flaxen's, only older, more glorified, more womanly. He was asking himself some searching questions to-night as his tired limbs dragged themselves over the grassy road.

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What was he toiling for, anyway? What mattered all this terrible tramping to and fro—was it an end or only a means? Would there ever come anything like satisfaction of desire? Life for him had been a silent, gloomy, and almost purposeless struggle. He had not looked forward to anything very definite, though vaguely he had hoped for something better.

As his eyes fell upon the twinkling, yellow lights of the village his thoughts came back to Flaxen and to the letter which he expected to receive from her. He quickened his steps, though his feet were sore and his limbs stiff and lame.

The one little street presented its usual Saturday-night appearance. Teams were hitched to the narrow plank walk before the battlemented wooden stores. Men stood here and there in listless knots, smoking, talking of the weather and of seeding, while their wives, surrounded by shy children, traded within. Being Saturday night, the saloons were full of men, and shouts and the clink of beer-mugs could be heard at intervals. But the larger crowd was gathered at the post-office: uncouth farmers of all nationalities, clerks, land-sharks, lawyers, and giggling girls in couples, who took delight in mingling with the crowd.

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Judge Sid Balsler was over from Boomtown, and was talking expansively to a crowd of "leading citizens" about a scheme to establish a horse-car line between Boomtown and Belleplain.

Colonel Arran, of the Belleplain *Argus*, in another corner, not ten feet away, was saying that the judge was "a scoundrel, a blow-hard, and would down his best lover for a pewter cent," to all of which the placid judge was accustomed and gave no heed.

Bert paid no attention to the colonel or to the judge, or to any of this buzzing. "They are just talking to hear themselves make a noise, anyway. They talk about building up the country—they who are a rope and a grindstone around the necks of the rest of us, who do the work."

99

When Gearheart reached his box he found a large, square letter in it, and looking at it saw that it was from Flaxen directed to Anson. "Her picture, probably," he said as he held it up. As he was pushing rapidly out he heard a half-drunken fellow say, in what he thought was an inaudible tone:

"There's Gearheart. Wonder what's become of his little Norsk."

Gearheart turned, and pushing through the crowd, thrust his eyes into the face of the speaker with a glare that paralysed the poor fool.

"What's become o' your sense?" he snarled, and his voice had in it a carnivorous note.

With this warning he turned contemptuously and passed out, leaving the discomfited rowdy to settle accounts with his friends. But there was a low note in the ruffian's voice, an insinuating inflection, which stayed with him all along the way home, like a bad taste in the mouth. He saw by the aid of a number of these side-lights of late that Flaxen never could come back to them in the old relation; but how could she come back?

100

Gearheart stopped and gazed thoughtfully upward. She must come back as the wife of Ans or himself. "Pooh! she is only a child," he said, snapping his finger and walking on. But the insistence remained. "She is not a child—she is a maiden, soon to be a woman; she has no relatives, no home to go to but ours after her two or three years of schooling are over. It must still be her home; no breath of scandal shall touch her if I can prevent it; and after her two years are up"—after a long, motionless reverie he strode forward—"she shall choose between us."

There had grown up between the two friends of late a constraint, or, to be more exact, Gearheart had held himself in before his friend, had not discussed these problems with him at all. "Ans is just like a boy," he had said to himself; "he don't seem to understand the case, and I don't know as it's my duty to enlighten him; he either feels very sure about her, or he

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has not understood the situation."

He was thinking this now as he strode across the spongy sod toward the lighted windows of the shanty. The air was damp and chill, for the ice was not yet out of the ponds or swamps of tall grasses. An occasional prairie-cock sent forth a muffled, drowsy "boom"; low-hung flights of geese, gabbling anxiously, or the less-orderly ducks, with hissing wings, swept by overhead, darkly limned against the stars. There was a strange charm in the raw air. The weary man almost forgot his pain as he drew deep breathings of the night.

It was significant of the restraint that had grown up between him and Anson that he held the letter from Flaxen unopened in his hand simply because it was directed to his friend. He knew that it was as much to him as to Anson, and yet, feeling as he had of late, he would not open it, for he would have been angry if Anson had opened one directed to him. He simply judged Anson by himself.

102

The giant was asleep when he entered. His great, shaggy head lay beside the lamp on his crossed arms. Bert laid the letter down beside him and shook him.

"Hello! got back, hey?" the sleeper said, rousing up sluggishly. "Anything?" Then he caught sight of the letter. "Oh, bless her little heart! Wonder what it is? Picture, bet my hat!" Here he opened it.

"Gee whittiker, thunder and turf, gosh-all—Friday!—look a-there! Ain't she growed!" he yelled, holding the picture by the corner and moving it into all sorts of positions. "That's my little girl—our Flaxen; she can't grow so purty but what I'd know her. See that hair done up on the top of her head! Look at that dress, an' the thingumajigs around her neck! Oh, she's gittin' there, Smith, hey?"

"She's changing pretty fast," said Bert listlessly.

"Changin' fast! Say, ol' man, what's the matter with you? Are y' sick?"

"I'm played out, that's all."

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"Darn my skin! I should think y' would be, draggin' all day, an' then walkin' all o' four mile to the post-office. Jest lay down on the bed there, ol' boy, while I read the letter to yeh. Say, ol' man, don't you git up in the mornin' till you please. I'll look after the breakfast," insisted Anson, struck with remorse by the expression on Bert's face. "But here's the letter. Short an' sweet."

DEAR BOYS [Bless the little fist that wrote that!]. I send my picture. I think it is a nice one. The girls say it flatters me, but Will says it don't [What the devil do we care what Will says?—I guess it does, don't you? I wish I had a picture of you both; I want to show the girls how handsome you are [she means me, of course. No, confound it] how handsome you are both of you. I wish you would send me your pictures both of you. I ain't got much to say. I will write again soon.

ELGA.

Bert looked at the picture over Anson's shoulder, but did not seem to pay much attention to it.

"Wal, I'll go out an' shut the barn door. Nights git cold after the sun goes down. You needn't peel the 'taters to-night. We'll bake 'em, brussels an' all, to-morrow mornin'."

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When Anson had gone, Bert snatched up the picture with great eagerness and gazed upon it with a steady, devouring glance. How womanly she looked with her hair done up so, and the broad, fair face and full bosom.

He heard Anson returning from the barn, and hastily laid the picture down, and when Anson entered was apparently dropping off to sleep.

CHAPTER X.

105

FLAXEN COMES HOME ON A VACATION.

It was in June, just before the ending of the school, that Flaxen first began to write about delaying her return. Anson was wofully disappointed. He had said all along that she would make tracks for home just as soon as school was out, and he had calculated just when she would arrive; and on the second day after the close of school for the summer he drove down to the train to meet her. She did not come, but he got a letter which said that one of

her friends wanted her to stay two weeks with her, until after the Fourth of July.

"She's an awful nice girl, and we will have a grand time; she has a rich father and a piano and a pony and a buggy. It will just be grand."

"I don't blame her none," sighed Anson to Bert. "I don't want her to come away while she's enjoyin' herself. It'll be a big change for her to come back an' cook f'r us old mossbacks after bein' at school an' in good company all these months."

He was plainly disturbed. Her vacation was going to be all too short at the best, and he was so hungry for the sight of her! Still, he could not blame her for staying, under the circumstances; as he told Bert, his feelings did not count. He just wanted her to get all she could out of life; "there ain't much, anyway, for us poor devils, but what little there is we want her to have."

The Fourth of July was the limit of her stay, and on the sixth, seventh, and eighth Anson drove regularly to the evening train to meet her.

On the third day another letter came, saying that she would reach home the next Monday. With this Anson rode home in triumph. During the next few days he went to the barber's and had his great beard shaved off. "Made me look so old," he explained, seeing Bert's wild start of surprise. "I've be'n carryin' that mop o' hair round so long I'd kind o' got into the notion o' bein' old myself. Got a kind o' crick in the back, y' know. But I ain't; I ain't ten years older'n you be."

And he was not. His long blond moustache, shaved beard, and clipped hair made a new man of him, and a very handsome man, too, in a large way. He was curiously embarrassed by Bert's prolonged scrutiny, and said jocosely:

"We've got to brace up a little now. Company boarders comin', young lady from St. Peter's Seminary, city airs an' all that sort o' thing. Don't you let me see you eatin' pie with y'r knife. I'll break the shins of any man that feeds himself with anythin' 'cept the silver-plated forks I've bought."

Flaxen had been gone almost a year, and a year counts for much at her age. Besides, Anson had exaggerated ideas of the amount of learning she could absorb in a year at a boarding-seminary, and he had also a very vague idea of what "society" was in St. Peter, although he seemed suddenly to awake to the necessity of "bracing up" a little and getting things generally into shape. He bought a new suit of clothes and a second-hand two-seated carriage, notwithstanding the sarcastic reflection of his partner, who was making his own silent comment upon this thing.

"The paternal business is *auskerspeelt*," he said to himself. "Ans is goin' in on shape now. Well, it's all right; nobody's business but ours. Let her go, Smith; but they won't be no talk in this neighbourhood when they get hold of what's goin' on—oh, no!" He smiled grimly. "We can stand it, I guess; but it'll be hard on her. Ans is a little too previous. It's too soon to spring this trap on the poor little thing."

They stood side by side on the platform the next Monday when the train rolled into the station at Boomtown, panting with fatigue from its long run. Flaxen caught sight of Bert first as she sprang off the train, and running to him, kissed him without much embarrassment. Then she looked around, saying:

"Where's ol' pap? Didn't he—"

"Why, Flaxen, don't ye know me?" he cried out at her elbow.

She knew his voice, but his shaven face, so much more youthful, was so strange that she knew him only by his eyes laughing down into hers. Nevertheless she kissed him doubtfully.

"Oh, what've you done? You've shaved off your whiskers; you don't look a bit natural. I—"

She was embarrassed, almost frightened, at the change in him. He "looked so queer"; his fair, untroubled, smiling face and blond moustache made him look younger than Bert.

"Nev' mind that! She'll grow again if y' like it better. Get int' this new buggy—it's ours. They ain't no flies on us to-day; not many," said Ans in high glee, elaborately assisting her to the carriage, not appreciating the full meaning of the situation.

As they rode home he was extravagantly gay. He sat beside her, and she drove, wild with delight at the prairie, the wheat, the gulls, everything.

"Ain't no dust on our clo'es," said Ans, coughing, winking at Bert, and brushing off with an elaborately finical gesture an imaginary fleck from his knee and elbow. "Ain't we togged out? I guess nobody said 'boo' to us down to St. Peter, eh?"

"You like my clo'es?" said Flaxen, with charming directness.

"You bet! They're scrumptious."

"Well, they ought to be; they're my best, except my white dress. I thought you'd like 'em; I wore 'em a-purpose."

"Like 'em? They're—you're jest as purty as a red lily er a wild rose in the wheat—ahem! Ain't she, Bert, ol' boy? We're jest about starvin' to death, we are."

"I knew you'd be. What'll I stir up for supper? Biscuits?"

"Um, um! Say, what y' s'pose I've got to go with 'em?"

"Honey."

"Oh, you're too sharp," wailed Ans, while Flaxen went off into a peal of laughter. "Say, Bert's be'n in the *damnedest*—excuse me—plaguedest temper fer the last two munce as you ever did see." 111

While this chatter was going on Bert sat silent and unsmiling on the back seat. He was absorbed in seeing the exquisite colour that played in her cheek and the equally charming curves of her figure. She was well dressed and was wonderfully mature. He was saying to himself: "Ans ain't got no more judgment than a boy. We can't keep that girl here. More'n that, the girl never'll be contented again, unless—" He did not allow himself to go farther. He dared not even think farther.

They had a merry time that night, quite like old times. The biscuits were light and flaky, the honey was delightful, and the milk and butter (procured specially) were fresh. They shouted in laughter as Flaxen insisted on their eating potatoes with a fork, and opposed the use of the knife in scooping up the honey from their plates! Even the saturnine Bert forgot his gloom and laughed too, as Ans laboriously dipped his honey with a fork, and, finally growing desperate, split a biscuit in half, and in the good old boyish way sopped it in the honey. 112

"There, that's the Christian way of doing things!" he exulted, while Flaxen laughed. How bright she was—how strange she acted! There were moments when she embarrassed them by some new womanly grace or accomplishment, some new air which she had caught from her companions or teachers at school. It was truly amazing how much she had absorbed outside of her regular studies. She indeed was no longer a girl; she was a young woman, and to them a beautiful one.

Not a day passed without some added surprise which made Anson exult and say, "She's gettin' her money's worth down there—no two ways about that."

CHAPTER XI.

113

FLAXEN GROWS RESTLESS.

But as the excitement of getting back died out, poor Flaxen grew restless, moody, and unaccountable. Before, she had always been the same cheery, frank, boyish creature. As Bert said, "You know where to find her." Now she was full of strange tempers and moods. She would work most furiously for a time, and then suddenly fall dreaming, looking away out on the shimmering plain toward the east.

At Bert's instigation, a middle-aged widow had been hired, at a fabulous price, to come and do the most of the work for them, thus releasing Flaxen from the weight of the hard work, which perhaps was all the worse for her. Hard work might have prevented the unbearable, sleepless pain within. She hated the slatternly Mrs. Green at once for her meddling with her affairs, though the good woman meant no offence. She was jocose in the broad way of middle-aged persons, to whom a love-affair is legitimate food for raillery. 114

But Gearheart's keen eye was on Flaxen as well. He saw how eagerly she watched for the mail on Tuesdays and Fridays, and how she sought a quiet place at once in order to read and dream over her letters. She was restless a day or two before a certain letter came, with an eager, excited, expectant air. Then, after reading it, she was absent-minded, flighty in conversation, and at last listlessly uneasy, moving slowly about from one thing to another, in a kind of restless inability to take continued interest in anything.

All this, if it came to the attention of Anson at all, was laid to the schooling the girl had had.

"Of course it'll seem a little slow to you, Flaxie, but harvestin' is comin' on soon, an' then

things'll be a little more lively."

But Gearheart was not so slow-witted. He had had sisters and girl cousins, and knew "the symptoms," as Mrs. Green would have put it. He noticed that when Flaxen read her letters to them there was one which she carefully omitted. He knew that this was the letter which meant the most to her. He saw how those letters affected her, and thought he had divined in what way.

One day when Flaxen, after reading her letters, sprang up and ran into her bedroom, her eyes filled with sudden tears, Gearheart crooked his finger at Ans, and they went out to the barn together.

It was nearly one o'clock on an intolerable day peculiar to the Dakota plain. A frightfully hot, withering, and powerful wind was abroad. The thermometer stood nearly a hundred in the shade, and the wind, so far from being a relief, was suffocating because of its heat and the dust it swept along with it.

The heavy-headed grain and russet grass writhed and swirled as if in agony, and dashed high in waves of green and yellow. The corn-leaves had rolled up into long cords like the lashes of a whip, and beat themselves into tatters on the dry, smooth spot their blows had made beneath them; they seemed ready to turn to flame in the pitiless, furnace-like blast. Everywhere in the air was a silver-white, impalpable mist, which gave to the cloudless sky a whitish cast. The glittering gulls were the only living things that did not move listlessly and did not long for rain. They soared and swooped, exulting in the sounding wind; now throwing themselves upon it, like a swimmer, then darting upward with miraculous ease, to dip again into the shining, hissing, tumultuous waves of the grass.

Along the roads prodigious trains of dust rose hundreds of feet in the air, and drove like vast caravans with the wind. So powerful was the blast that men hesitated about going out with carriages, and everybody watched feverishly, expecting to see fire break out on the prairie and sweep everything before it. Work in the fields had stopped long before dinner, and the farmers waited, praying or cursing, for the wheat was just at the right point to be blighted.

As the two men went out to the shed side by side, they looked out on the withering wheat-stalks and corn-leaves with gloomy eyes.

"Another day like this, an' they won't be wheat enough in this whole county to make a cake," said Anson, with a calm intonation, which after all betrayed the anxiety he felt. They sat down in the wagon-shed near the horses' mangers. They listened to the roar of the wind and the pleasant sound of the horses eating their hay, a good while before either of them spoke again. Finally Bert said sullenly:

"We can't put up hay such a day as this. You couldn't haul it home under lock an' key while this infernal wind is blowin'. It's gittin' worse, if anythin'."

Anson said nothing, but waited to hear what Bert had brought him out here for. Bert speared away with his knife at a strip of board. Anson sat on a wagon-tongue, his elbows on his knees, looking intently at the grave face of his companion. The horses ground cheerily at the hay.

"Ans, we've got to send Flaxen back to St. Peter; she's so homesick she don't know what to do."

Ans' eyes fell.

"I know it. I've be'n hopin' she'd git over that, but it's purty tough on her, after bein' with the young folks in the city f'r a year, to come back here on a farm." He did not finish for a moment. "But she can't stand it. I'd looked ahead to havin' her here till September, but I can't stand it to see her cryin' like she did to-day. We've got to give up the idee o' her livin' here. I don't see any other way but to sell out an' go back East somewhere."

Bert saw that Anson was still ignorant of the real state of affairs, but thought he would say nothing for the present.

"Yes: that's the best thing we can do. We'll send her right back, an' take our chances on the crops. We can git enough to live on an' keep her at school, I guess."

They sat silent for a long time, while the wind tore round the shed, Bert spearing at the stick, and Anson watching the hens as they vainly tried to navigate in the wind. Finally Anson spoke:

"The fact is, Bert, this ain't no place f'r a woman, anyway—such a woman as Flaxen's gittin' to be. They ain't nothin' goin' on, nothin' to see 'r hear. You can't expect a girl to be contented with this country after she's seen any other. No trees; no flowers; jest a lot o' little shanties full o' flies."

"I knew all that, Ans, a year ago. I knew she'd never come back here, but I jest said it's the thing to do—give her a chance, if we don't have a cent; now let's go back to the house an' tell her she needn't stay here if she don't want to."

"Wha' d' ye s'pose was in that letter?"

"Couldn't say. Some girl's description of a pic-nic er somethin'." Bert was not yet ready to tell what he knew. When they returned to the house the girl was still invisible, in her room. Mrs. Green was busy clearing up the dinner-dishes.

"I don't know's I ever see such a wind back to Michigan. Seems as if it 'u'd blow the hair off y'r head."

"Oh, this ain't nothin'. This is a gentle zephyr. Wait till y' see a wind."

"Wal, I hope to goodness I won't never see a wind. Zephyrs is all I can mortally stand."

Anson went through the little sitting-room and knocked on Flaxen's door.

"Flaxie, we want to talk to yeh." There was no answer, and he came back and sat down. Bert pointed to the letter which Flaxen had flung down on the table. The giant took it, folded it up, and called, "Here's y'r letter, babe."

The door opened a little, and a faint, tearful voice said:

"Read it, if ye want to, boys." Then the door closed tightly again, and they heard her fling herself on the bed. Anson handed the letter to Bert, who read it in a steady voice.

DEAR DARLING: I have good news to tell you. My uncle was out from Wisconsin to see me, and he was pleased with what I had done, and he bought out Mr. Ford, and gave me the whole half interest. I'm to pay him back when I please. Ain't that glorious? Now we can get married right off, can't we, darling? So you just show this letter to your father, and tell him how things stand. I've got a good business. The drug store is worth \$1,200 a year—my half—but knock off fifty per cent and we could live nicely. Don't you think so? I want to see you so bad, and talk things over. If you can't come back soon, I will come on. Write soon.

Yours till death,
WILL.

From the first word Anson winced, grew perplexed, then suffered. His head drooped forward on his hands, his elbows rested on his vast, spread knees. He drew his breath with a long, grieving gasp. Bert read on steadily to the end, then glanced at his companion with a deep frown darkening his face; but he was not taken by surprise. He had not had paternal affection change to the passion of a lover only to have it swept down like a half-opened flower. For the first time in his life Anson writhed in mental agony. He saw it all. It meant eternal separation. It meant a long ache in his heart which time could scarcely deaden into a tolerable pain.

Gearheart rose and went out, unwilling to witness the agony of his friend and desiring himself to be alone. Anson sat motionless, with his hands covering his wet eyes, going over the past and trying to figure the future.

He began in that storm: felt again the little form and face of the wailing child; thought of the frightful struggle against the wind and snow; of the touch of the little hands and feet; of her pretty prattle and gleeful laughter; then of her helpful and oddly-womanish ways as she grew older; of the fresh, clear voice calling him "pap" and ordering him about with a roguish air; of her beauty now, when for the first time he had begun to hope that she might be something dearer to him.

How could he live without her? She had grown to be a part of him. He had long ceased to think of the future without her. As he sat so, the bedroom door opened, and Flaxen's tearful face looked out at him. He did not seem to hear, and she stole up to him and, putting her arm around his neck, laid her cheek on his head—a dear, familiar, childish gesture, used when she wished to propitiate him. He roused himself and put his arm about her waist, tried to speak, and finally said in a sorry attempt at humor, wofully belied by the tears on his face and the choking in his throat:

"You tell that feller—if he wants ye, to jest come an'—git ye—that's all!"

Elga went back to her friends, the Holts, in the course of a week. It hurt Anson terribly to see how eager she was to get away, and he grew a little bitter—a quality of temper Bert did not know he possessed.

"What's that little whipper-snapper ever done for her, that she should leave us in the shade f'r him—f'r get us an' all we've done f'r her, an' climb out an' leave us just at his wink? It beats me, but it's all right. I don't blame her if she feels so—only it does seem queer, now don't it?"

"It does, that's a fact—'specially the idea of leaving us for a thing like that."

After arriving at a complete understanding of the matter, they said no more about it, but went to work to make everything as pleasant for Flaxen as possible. Again they rode down to the station with her, down past the wide, level fields of grain which the blazing sun had ripened prematurely. Again they parted from her at the train, but this time the girl was eager to go; and yet a peculiar feeling of sadness was mixed with her eagerness to be off.

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"Now, boys, you'll come down just as soon as you can this fall, won't you?" she said, tearfully, as they stood in the aisle of the car. "I wish't you'd sell out an' come back there an' live—I want you to."

"Well, we'll try," Anson said, speaking with difficulty, the lump in his throat was so big and so dry.

They rode home in silence again, but this time there was something darker and more sullen in their thoughts.

"Well, Ans, that settles it. We're orphaned again, sure." He tried to give a little touch of jocoseness to it, but failed miserably.

"Yes," Anson sighed deeply, "we'll haf t' stand it, I s'pose, but it's tough."

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It was hard, but it would have been harder had not the rush and push of the harvest come upon them just as it did. They never spoke of the matter again, except as a matter settled, till they received a letter from the young people asking their consent to an early marriage.

They both read the letter, and then Anson said, without raising his eyes:

"Well, what d' you think of it?"

"Oh, we might as well say yes," replied Bert irritably.

"But she's so young."

"She seems so to us, but my mother was married at fifteen. If she's going to leave us, why, the sooner she has a home the better, I s'pose."

"I s'pose you're right. But I'd rather have 'em put it off a year."

"Oh, a year wouldn't make any difference, and besides, you can't stop the thing now. She's out of our hands."

They wrote giving their consent, and the wedding was fixed for late September to enable the fall's work to be put out of the way. For Elga's sake they bought new suits and hats before starting on their trip, though the harvest hardly justified any extravagance.

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Under other circumstances they would have rejoiced over the trip, for it was carrying them back to the gleam of leaf-dappled streams and waving trees and deep, cool forests. It made their nostrils dilate with pleasure as they whirled past fern-filled ravines, out of which the rivulets stole with stealthy circuits under mossy rocks. They were both forest-born, and it was like getting back home out of a strange desert country to come back into "the States."

St. Peter was a small town, situated on the steep bank of a broad river—that is to say, the business street was there, but the seminary and the residence part of the town was on a high and beautiful plateau. The country was well diversified with wood and prairie.

Kendall and Elga met them at the station. Elga with flushed face was searching the car-windows with eager glance, when Anson appeared on the platform. The quick rush she made for him drove out all his bitterness. It made him understand that she loved him as if he were her father.

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She greeted Bert with a little less warmth, and chattering with joy she led the way up the street with Anson. She had a hundred things to tell him, and he listened in a daze. She seemed so different from his Flaxen. Bert walked behind with Kendall, who did not impress him favourably.

He was a harmless little creature enough—small, a little inclined to bow-legs, and dudish in manner and dress. His hair was smoothed till it shone like ebony, and he wore the latest designs in standing collars, high on his slim neck. His hands were beautifully small and white and held several rings. He had the manners of a dry-goods clerk.

"He can't abuse her, that's one good thing about the whelp," thought Bert as he crushed the young bridegroom's hand in his brown palm, just to see him cringe.

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As for Kendall, he was a little afraid of these big fellows, so sullen and strong; and he tried his best to please them, chirping away brightly upon all kinds of things, ending up by telling them his business plans.

"We're one o' the best cities on the river. Couldn't be a better place fer a business stand, don't you see? And we're getting to the front with our wholesale department (of course—ha! ha! my wife's father ought to know how I'm getting on), so you're welcome to look over my books. Our trade is a cash trade so far as our retail trade goes, and we're mighty careful who gets tick from us on the wholesale trade. We're developing a great business."

Bert and Anson made no replies to his chatter, and he pattered along by Anson's side like a small boy, showing them the town and its beauties. Anson inwardly despised the little man, but held it a sort of treason to think so, and tried to look upon him kindly.

The wedding took place in the house of the Holt family, and was in charge of Miss Holt, Elga's teacher. Kendall's parents could not be present, which was a great disappointment to Elga, but Will was secretly glad of it. His father was a very crusty and brutal old fellow, and he would not have fitted in smoothly beside Bert and Anson, who were as uncomfortable as men could well be. Both wished to avoid it, but dared not object.

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Anson stood bravely through the ceremony as the father of the bride, and bore himself with his usual massive, rude dignity. But he inwardly winced as he saw Elga, looking very stately and beautiful in her bride's veil, towering half a head above the sleek-haired little clerk. Not a few of the company smiled at the contrast, but she had no other feeling than perfect love and happiness.

When the ceremony was over and Anson looked around for Bert, he was gone. He couldn't stand the pressure of the crowd and the whispered comments, and had slipped away early in the evening.

Among the presents which were laid on the table in the dining-room was a long envelope addressed to Mrs. Will Kendall. It contained a deed for a house and lot in one of the most desirable parts of the suburbs. It was from Gearheart, but there was no other written word. This gift meant the sale of his claim in Dakota.

131

When Anson got back to the hotel that night, wondering and alarmed at his partner's absence, he found a letter from him. It was savage and hopeless.

This climate is getting too frigid for my lungs. I'm going to emigrate to California. I made a mistake: I ought to have gone in for stand-up collars, shiny hair, and bow-legs. You'd better skip back to Dakota and sell your claim. Keep my share of the stock and tools; it ain't worth bothering about. Don't try to live there alone, old man. If you can't sell, marry. Don't let that girl break you all up too. We are all fools, but some can get over it quicker than others.

If that little bow-legged thing gets under your feet or abuses her, jest get your toe under him and hoist him over into the alley.

Good-bye and good luck, old man.

BERT.

And the next day the doubly bereaved man started on his lonely journey back to the Dakota claim, back to an empty house, with a gnawing pain in his heart and a constriction like an iron band about his throat; back to his broad fields to plod to and fro alone.

132

As he began to realize it all and to think how terrible was this loss, he laid his head down on the car-seat before him and cried. His first great trial had come to him, and meeting it like a man, he must now weep like a woman.

CHAPTER XIII.

133

FLAXEN'S GREAT NEED.

Flaxen wrote occasionally, during the next year, letters all too short and too far between for the lonely man toiling away on his brown farm. These letters were very much alike, telling mainly of how happy she was, and of what she was going to do by and by, on Christmas or Thanksgiving. Once she sent a photograph of herself and husband, and Anson, after studying it for a long time, took a pair of shears and cut the husband off, and threw him into the fire.

"That fellow gives me the ague," he muttered.

Bert did not write, and there was hardly a night that Anson lay down on his bed that he did not wonder where his chum was, especially as the winter came on unusually severe, reminding him of that first winter in the Territory. Day after day he spent alone in his house, going out only to feed the cattle or to get the mail. The sad wind was always in his ears. But with the passage of time the pain in his heart lost its intensity.

134

One day he got a letter from Flaxen that startled and puzzled him. It was like a cry for help, somehow.

"Dear old pap, I wish you was here," and then in another place came the piteous cry, "Oh, I wish I had some folks!"

All night long that cry rang in the man's head with a wailing, falling cadence like the note of a lost little prairie-chicken.

"I wonder what that whelp has been doin' now. If he's begun to abuse her I'll wring his neck. She wants me an' da'sn't ask me to come. Poor chick, I'll be pap an' mam to ye, both," he said at last, with sudden resolution.

The day after the receipt of this letter a telegram was handed to him at the post-office, which he opened with trembling hands:

135

ANSON WOOD: Your daughter is ill. Wants you. Come at once.

DR. DIETRICH.

He got into his wagon mechanically and lashed his horses into a run. He must get home and arrange about his stock and catch the seven o'clock train. His mind ran the round of the possibilities in the case until it ached with the hopeless fatigue of it. When he got upon the train for an all-night ride, he looked like a man suffering some great physical pain.

He sat there all night in a common seat—he could not afford to pay for a sleeper; sat and suffered the honest torture that can come to a man—to sit and think the same dread, apprehensive wondering thoughts; to strain at the seat as if to push the train faster, and to ache with the desire to fly like the eagle. He tried to be patient, but he could only grow numb with the effort.

A glorious winter sun was beginning to light up the frost foliage of the maples lining St. Peter's streets when Anson, stiff with cold and haggard with a night of sleepless riding, sprang off the train and looked about him. The beauty of the morning made itself felt even through his care. These rows of resplendent maples, heavy with iridescent frost, were like fairy-land to him, fresh from the treeless prairie. As he walked on under them, showers of powdered rubies and diamonds fell down upon him; the colonnades seemed like those leading to some enchanted palace, such as he had read of in boyhood. Every shrub in the yards was similarly decked, and the snug cottages were like the little house which he had once seen at the foot of the Christmas-tree in a German church years before.

136

Feet crunched along cheerily on the sidewalks, bells of dray-teams were beginning to sound, and workmen to whistle.

Anson was met at the door by a hard-faced, middle-aged woman.

"How's my girl?" he asked.

"Oh, she's nicely. Walk in."

"Can I see her now?"

"She's sleepin'; I guess you better wait a little while till after breakfast."

137

"Where's Kendall?" was his next question.

"I d'n' know. Hain't seen 'im sence yesterday. He don't amount to much, anyway, and in these cases there ain't no dependin' on a boy like that. It's nachel fer girls to call on their mothers an' fathers in such cases."

Anson was about to ask her what the trouble was with his girl, when she turned away. She could not be dangerously ill; anyway, there was comfort in that.

After he had eaten a slight breakfast of bad coffee and yellow biscuits, Mrs. Stickney came back.

"She's awake an' wants to see yeh. Now don't get excited. She ain't dangerous."

Anson was alarmed and puzzled at her manner. Her smile mystified him.

"What is the matter?" he demanded.

Her reply was common enough, but it stopped him with his foot on the threshold. He understood at last. The majesty and mystery of birth was like a light in his face, and dazzled him. He was awed and exalted at the same time. 138

"Open the door; I want to see her," he said in a new tone.

As they entered the darkened chamber he heard his girl's eager cry.

"Is that you, pap?" wailed her faint, sweet voice.

"Yes: it's me, Flaxie." He crossed the room and knelt by the bed. She flung her arms round his neck.

"O pappy! pappy! I wanted you. Oh, my poor mamma! O pap, I don't like her," she whispered, indicating the nurse with her eyes. "O pap, I hate to think of mother lying there in the snow—an' Bert—where is Bert, pap? Perhaps he's in the blizzard too—"

"She's a little flighty," said the nurse in her matter-of-fact tone.

Anson groaned as he patted the pale cheek of the sufferer.

"Don't worry, Flaxie; Bert's all right. He'll come home soon. Why don't you send for the doctor?" he said to the nurse. 139

"He'll be here soon. Don't worry over that," indicating Flaxen, who was whispering to herself. "They of'n do that."

"Do you s'pose I can find my folks if I go back to Norway?" she said to Anson a little after.

"Yes: I guess so, little one. When you get well, we'll try an' see."

"Perhaps if I found my aunt she'd look like mamma, an' I'd know then how mamma looked, wouldn't I? Perhaps if the wheat is good this year we can go back an' find her, can't we?" Then her words melted into a moan of physical pain, and the nurse said:

"Now I guess you'd better go an' see if you can't hurry the doctor up. Yes: now he's got to go," she went on to Flaxen, drowning out her voice and putting her imploring hands back upon the bed.

Anson saw it all now. In her fear and pain she had turned to him—poor, motherless little bird—forgetting her boy-husband or feeling the need of a broader breast and stronger hand. It was a beautiful trust, and as the great, shaggy man went out into the morning he was exalted by the thought. "My little babe—my Flaxen!" he said with unutterable love and pity. 140

Again his mind ran over the line of his life—the cabin, the dead woman, the baby face nestling at his throat, the girl coming to him with her trials and triumphs. His heart swelled so that he could not have spoken, but deep in his throat he muttered a dumb prayer. And how he suffered that day, hearing her babble mixed with moanings every time the door opened. Once the doctor said:

"It's no use for you to stand here, Wood. It only makes you suffer and don't help her a particle."

"It *seems* 's if it helped her, an' so—I guess I'll stay. She may call for me, an' if she does," he said resolutely, "I'm goin' in, doctor. How is she now?"

"She's slightly delirious now, but still she knows you're here. She now and then speaks of you, but doesn't call for you."

But she did call for him, and he went in, and kneeling by her side he talked to her and held her hands, stroked her hair and soothed her as he used to when a little child unable to speak save in her pretty Norseland tongue, and at last when opiates were given, and he rose and staggered from the room, it seemed as though he had lived years. 141

So weary was he that, when the doctor came out and said, "You may go to sleep now," he dropped heavily on a lounge and fell asleep almost with the motion. Even the preparations for breakfast made by the hoarse-voiced servant-girl did not wake him, but the drawling, nasal tone of Kendall did. He sat up and looked at the oily little clerk. It was after seven o'clock.

"Hello!" said Kendall, "when d' you get in?"

"Shortly after you went out," said Anson in reply.

Kendall felt the rebuke, and as he twisted his cuffs into place said, "Well, y' see I couldn't do no good—a man ain't any good in such cases, anyway—so I just thought I'd run down to St. Paul an' do a little buying."

142

Anson turned away and went into the kitchen to wash his face and to comb his hair, glad to get rid of the sight of Kendall for a moment. Mrs. Stickney was toasting some bread.

"She's awake an' wants to see you when you woke up. It's a girl—thought I'd tell ye—yes: she's comfortable. Say, 'tween you an' me, a man 'at 'u'd run off—waal—" she ended, expressively glancing at Kendall.

Once more Anson caught his breath as he entered the darkened chamber. He was a rough, untaught man, but there was something in him that made that room holy and mysterious. But the figure on the bed was tranquil now, and the voice, though weak and low, was Flaxen's own.

He stopped as his eyes fell on her. She was no longer a girl. The majesty of maternity was on her pale face and in her great eyes. A faint, expectant smile was on her lips; her eyes were fixed on his face as she drew the cover from the little red, weirdly-wrinkled face at her throat.

143

Before he could speak, and while he was looking down at the mite of humanity, Kendall stepped into the room.

"Hello, Ellie! How are—"

A singular revulsion came out on her face. She turned to Anson. "Make him go 'way; I don't want him."

"All right," said Kendall cheerfully, glad to escape.

"Isn't she beautiful?" the mother whispered. "Does she look like me?" she asked artlessly.

"She's beautiful to me because she's yours, Flaxie," replied Anson, with a delicacy all the more striking because of the contrast with his great frame and hard, rough hands. "But there, my girl, go to sleep like baby, an' don't worry any more."

"You ain't goin' away while I'm sick?" she asked, following him with her eyes, unnaturally large.

"I won't never go 'way again if you don't want me to," he replied.

144

"Oh, I'm so glad!" she sighed restfully.

He was turning to go when she wailed reproachfully, "Pap, you didn't kiss baby!"

Anson turned and came back. "She's sleepin', an' I thought it wasn't right to kiss a girl without she said so."

This made Flaxen smile, and Anson went out with a lighter heart than he had had for two years. Kendall met him outside and said confidentially:

"I don't s'pose it was just the thing for me to do; but—confound it! I never could stand a sick-room, anyway. I couldn't do any good, anyway—just been in the way. She'll get over her mad in a few days. Think so?"

But she did not. Her singular and sudden dislike of him continued, and though she passively submitted to his being in the room, she would not speak a word to him nor look at him as long as she could avoid it; and when he approached the baby or took it in his arms a jealous frown came on her face.

145

As for Anson, he grew to hate the sound of that little chuckle of Kendall's; the part in the man's hair and the hang of his cut-away coat made him angry. The trim legs, a little bowed, the big cuffs hiding the small, cold hands, and the peculiar set of his faultless collar, grew daily more insupportable.

"Say, looky here, Kendall," said he in desperation one day, "I wish you didn't like me quite so well. We don't hitch first rate—at least, I don't. Seems to me you're neglectin' your business too much."

He was going to tell him to keep away, but he relented as he looked down at the harmless little man, with his thin, boyish face.

"Oh, my business is all right. Gregory looks after it mostly, anyhow. But, I say, if you

wanted to go into the dray business, there's a first-class opening now. Clark wants to sell."

It ended in Anson seeing Clark and buying out his line of drays, turning in his claim toward the payment—a transaction which made Flaxen laugh for joy, for she had not felt certain before that he would remain in St. Peter. She was getting about the house now, looking very wifely in her long, warm wraps, her slow motions contrasting strongly with the old restless, springing steps Anson remembered so well.

Night after night, as he sat beside the fire and held baby, listening to the changed voice of his girl and watching the grave, new expressions of her face, the tooth of time took hold upon him powerfully, and he would feel his shaggy head and think, "I'll soon be gray, soon be gray!" while the little one cooed, and sprang, and pulled at his beard, which had grown long again and had white hairs in it.

Kendall spent most of his time at the store, or downtown somewhere, and so all of those long, delicious winter evenings were Flaxen's and Anson's. And his enjoyment of them was pathetic. The cheerful little sitting-room, the open grate, the gracious, ever-growing womanliness of Elga, the pressure of soft little limbs, and the babble of a liquid baby language, were like the charm of an unexpected Indian-summer day between two gray November storms.

CHAPTER XIV.

KENDALL STEPS OUT.

One night Kendall did not come home, but as he had been talking of going to St. Paul they were not disturbed about it—in fact, they both took but very mild interest in his coming or going. In the morning, while they were at breakfast, there came a knock at the door.

"Come in," shouted Anson in the Western way, not rising.

McDaniel, the county sheriff, entered.

"Where's Kendall?" he asked without ceremony.

"I don't know; went away yesterday."

The sheriff looked at his companion. "Skipped between two days."

"What's up?" asked Anson, while Elga stared and baby reached slyly for the sugar-bowl.

"Nothing," the sheriff said in a tone which meant everything. "Come out here," he said to Anson. Anson went out with him, and he told him that Kendall had purchased goods on credit and gambled the money away, and was ruined.

His stock of goods was seized, and the house was saved only through the firmness of Anson.

Flaxen shut her lips and said nothing, and he could not read her silence. One day she came to him with a letter.

"Read that!" she exclaimed scornfully. He saw that it was dated from Eau Claire, Wisconsin:

DEAR DARLING WIFE: I'm all right here with father. It was all Gregory's fault—he was always betting on something. I'm coming back as soon as the old man can raise the money to pay Fitch. Don't worry about me. They can't take the house, anyway. You might rent the house, sell the furniture on the sly, and come back here. The old man will give me another show. I don't owe more than a thousand dollars, anyway. Write soon. Your loving

WILL.

She did not need to say what she thought of the advice the little villain gave.

Anson went quietly on with his work, making a living for himself and Flaxen and baby. It never occurred to either of them that any other arrangement was necessary. Kendall wrote once or twice a month for a while, saying each time, "I'll come back and settle up," and asking her to come to him; but she did not reply, and never referred to him outside her home, and when others inquired after him she replied evasively:

"He's in Wisconsin somewhere; I don't know where."

"Is he coming back?"

"I don't know."

She often spoke of Bert, and complained of his silence. Once she said:

"I guess he's forgot us, pap."

"I guess not. More likely he's thinkin' we've fergot him. He'll turn up some bright mornin' with a pocketful o' rocks. He ain't no spring chicken, Bert ain't." ("All the same, I wish't he'd write," Anson said to himself.)

151

The sad death of Kendall came to them without much disturbing force. He had been out of their lives so long that when Anson came in with the paper and letter telling of the accident, and with his instinctive delicacy left her alone to read the news, Flaxen was awed and saddened, but had little sense of personal pain and loss.

"Young Kendall," the newspaper went on under its scare-heads, "was on a visit to La Crosse, and while skating with a party on the bayou, where the La Crosse River empties into the Father of Waters, skated into an air-hole. The two young ladies with him were rescued, but the fated man was swept under the ice. He was the son," etc.

When Anson came back Flaxen sat with the letter in her hand and the paper on her lap. She was meditating deeply, but what was in her mind Anson never knew. She had grown more and more reticent of late. She sighed, rose, and resumed her evening tasks.

152

CHAPTER XV.

153

BERT COMES BACK.

One raw March evening, when the wind was roaring among the gray branches of the maples like a lion in wrath, some one knocked on the door.

"Come in!" shouted Anson, who was giving baby her regular ride on his boots.

"Come in!" added Flaxen.

Gearheart walked in slowly, closed the door behind his back, and stood devouring the cheerful scene. He was poorly dressed and wore a wide, limp hat; they did not know him till he bared his head.

"Bert!" yelled Anson, tossing the baby to his shoulder and leaping toward his chum, tramping and shaking and clapping like a madman, scaring the child.

"My gosh-all-hemlock! I'm glad to see ye! Gimme that paw again. Come to the fire. This is Flaxie" (as though he had not had his eyes on her face all the time). "Be'n sick?"

154

Bert's hollow cough prompted this question.

"Yes. Had some kind of a fever down in Arizony. Oh, I'm all right now," he added in reply to an anxious look from Flaxen.

"An' this is—"

"Baby—Elsie," she replied, putting a finishing touch to the little one's dress, mother-like.

"Where's he?" he asked a little later.

Anson replied with a little gesture, which silenced Bert at the same time that it explained. And when Flaxen was busy a few moments later, Anson said:

"Gone up the spout."

At the table they grew quite gay, talking over old times, and Bert's pale face grew rosier, catching a reflection of the happy faces opposite.

"Say, Bert, do you remember the time you threw that pan o' biscuits I made out into the grass an' killed every dog in the township?" Then they roared.

155

"I remember your flapjacks that always split open in the middle, an' no amount o' heat could cook 'em inside," Bert replied.

Then they grew sober again when Bert said with a pensive cadence: "Well, I tell you, those were days of hard work; but many's the time I've looked back at 'em these last three years, wishin' they'd never ended an' that we'd never got scattered."

"We won't be again, will we, pap?"

"Not if I can help it," Anson replied.

"But how are you, Bert? Rich?"

Bert put his hand into his pocket and laid a handful of small coins on the table.

"That's the size o' my pile—four dollars," he said, smiling faintly; "the whole o' my three years' work."

"Well, never mind, ol' man. I've got a chance fer yeh. Still an ol' bach?"

"Still an old bach." He looked at Flaxen, irresistibly drawn to her face. She dropped her eyes; she could not have told why. 156

And so "Wood & Gearheart" was painted on the sides of the drays, and they all continued to live in the little yellow cottage, enjoying life much more than the men, at least, had ever dared to hope; and little Elsie grew to be a "great girl," and a nuisance with her desire to "yide" with "g'an'pap."

There is no spot more delightful in early April than the sunny side of the barn, and Ans and Bert felt this, though they did not say it. The eaves were dripping, the doves cooing, the hens singing their harsh-throated, weirdly suggestive songs, and the thrilling warmth and vitality of the sun and wind of spring made the great, rude fellows shudder with a strange delight. Anson held out his palm to catch the sunshine in it, took off his hat to feel the wind, and mused:

"This is a great world—and a great day. I wish't it was always spring."

"Say," began Bert abruptly, "it seems pretty well understood that you're her father—but where do I come in?" 157

"You ought to be her husband." A light leaped into the younger man's face. "But go slow," Anson went on gravely. "This package is marked 'Glass; handle with care.'"

THE END. DA1

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We have made the following emendations to the text:

Chapter 9.

On [Page 102](#): The mark in the book between **Gee whittiker** is assumed to be an imperfection in the page.

Chapter 11.

On [Page 121](#): The mark in the book between **drug store** is assumed to be an imperfection in the page. There are three other occurrences of drug store in the novel without the hyphen, and none with.

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[Page DA11](#): removed single quote before ending double quote (after England) in '**how things are**' in England.'

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