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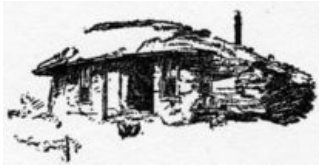

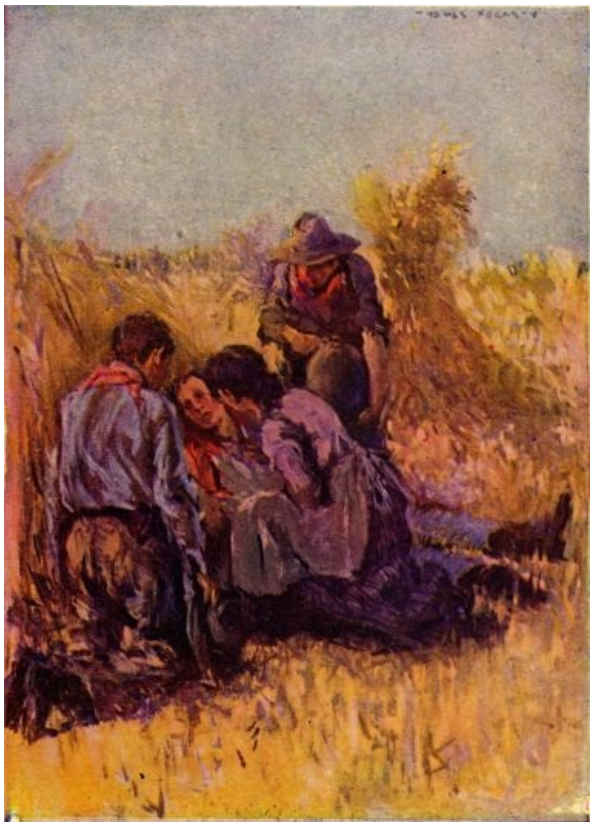

"THE GIRL ALSO KNELT AT HIS SIDE RENDERING
SUCH ASSISTANCE AS WAS IN HER POWER"

THE WIND BEFORE THE DAWN

BY DELL H. MUNGER

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THE WIND BEFORE THE DAWN

CHAPTER I

CASTLES IN SPAIN

The unclouded sun of a burning August day had driven bird and beast to shelter wherever a bit of shade could be found. The Kansas prairie afforded little refuge from sun or wind. The long stretches of low rolling hills were mostly covered with short grass, now dry from a protracted season of drought. Occasionally a group of stunted cottonwood trees surrounded an equally stunted looking hut, or dugout, but the blazing sunshine had browned all to a monotonous tone in keeping with the monotonous life it represented. The only corn to be seen was of the variety called sod-corn, which, unwashed by rain for a full month now, had failed to mature, such stalks as had tasselled at all being as barren as the rest because the tender silks had dried too rapidly and could furnish no fertilizing moisture to the pollen which sifted down from the scanty bloom above.

The sun’s rays beat down upon the head of a fourteen-year-old girl who rode slowly around a

herd of cattle, the members of which lay in the unavailing shade of the rosin weeds or browsed drowsily on the short grass. The day had been long and hard. The child knew that it was not later than two o'clock, having counted the hours eagerly since early morning, and having eaten her bit of cornbread and bacon full two hours before. She stopped her horse for the fortieth time, however, to get the angle of her shadow on the ground and to confirm her calculations. The sigh she gave as she again started on her round was not of relief, but of resignation. It was necessary to keep on the move or she was likely to fall asleep in her saddle, and then the cattle would escape to the nearby fields, and there would be a neighbourhood altercation over the matter, whether the fields held crops of value or not, farmers being jealous of their territorial rights, and ready to resent intrusion upon them.

Another horseback rider was moving across the prairie toward her, and the girl smiled when she saw him and stopped to watch his calico pony lope unevenly across the grass-covered slope. The pony was prone to drop into a rough trot at short intervals, and at such times was urged to renewed efforts by a dig of its rider's heels in the under regions of its stunted body. In order to get his heels in contact with his mount, the lanky boy was obliged to elevate his knees slightly, and when it was over his feet dropped languidly and his heavy plow-shoes dangled loosely, with several inches of bare ankle in evidence before the faded overalls concealed further stretches of the hairy legs.

"Howdie, Lizzie!" he said with a pleasant smile as he drew his pony up beside her. "I've got something to tell you. We've sold out, an' goin' right off. Th' other folks moved in last night. They was goin' through with a wagon an' stopped to eat. They found out that pap wanted to sell an' go back to Minnesoty, an' took th' land quick. I've come to say good-bye."

It had been so exciting that he had tumbled his news all out at once, although he was a quiet boy and slow of speech.

"Oh, Luther! Are you really going away?" The girl exclaimed in dismay.

"Yass," the boy replied, falling back unconsciously into Swedish pronunciation. He had begun his announcement with pleased animation, but now that it was out, and she was sorry, the going did not seem so pleasing. "I wisht I wasn't!" he added with quick dejection.

"I should think you'd be glad. I'd be glad, if I was going too."

The boy looked surprised and asked with some curiosity, "What do you want to go for? I thought you liked Kansas."

"Put your hand on your horse's neck," she commanded, leaning forward and setting the example.

The boy did as she told him, but drew his hand back suddenly.

"Gosh!" he exclaimed. "Don't their hair get hot in this sun!"

"Well, I'm just as hot as that all over," she replied emphatically, "and I want to go to a country where a body can get under a tree once in a while. I can't go in till five o'clock, and I forgot my jug, and I'm so thirsty I feel as if I'd crack like this ground," she said, pointing to the earth between them.

"Jimminy! I'll ride back and fetch you a drink," he said, poking his heels into his pony's ribs so suddenly that the little beast kicked spitefully.

The girl called after him to "never mind," but he was off on his errand. It was a good mile to her home, but the boy knew what it meant to forget the water-jug on a day like this.

When he returned half an hour later the sunshine had changed character and there was a peculiar dimming of its brilliancy.

"Is it going to rain?" the girl asked as she lowered the jug to her knee. She wiped her lips on the skirt of the faded sunbonnet she wore and looked up again.

"Rain!" Luther Hansen swept the horizon with the air of one who knew the signs, backing his horse about to see on all sides as he did so.

"Th' don't seem t' be any clouds," he said in surprise. "Ain't it queer! Looks's if it might be some kind of eclipse," he said. "Do you remember—no, of course you don't—but, th' was an eclipse of th' sun—total, I believe they called it—when I was only about seven year old. All th' chickens went to roost, it got so dark, an' when th' cover come off they crowed's if 'twas mornin'. We had a blue hen an' she crowed too. Pap killed 'er. He said it was bad luck t' have a hen crowin' about th' place."

"You all don't believe in luck, do you?" the child asked.

"I don't, but pap does," the boy answered apologetically. "I cried about th' blue hen; she was just like a dog; she'd let you ketch 'er, an' she'd sing, 'co-ook, co-ook, co-ook,' to 'erself, right in your arms, an' wasn't afraid. She wouldn't never set though. I guess that's why pap was so ready with his axe."

Happening to look up again, the girl gave an exclamation of surprise. "Is it snow?" she asked.

"No!"

They sat with their faces turned skyward, studying the upper air intently. The sun was completely obscured now and the rapidly moving mass, not unlike snow indeed, was being driven straight toward the north. Whatever it was, it was driving fiercely ahead, as if impelled

by a strong wind, though there was not a breath of air stirring below. Soon small objects began to detach themselves from the mass, so that the eye could distinguish separate particles, which looked not unlike scraps of silver driven with terrific force from the tail end of some gigantic machine. One of these scraps struck the girl on the cheek and she put her hand up quickly to feel the spot. While examining the place she received a similar blow on the forehead and another on the back of her hand. Drawing her bonnet down tight over her face for protection, she shaded her eyes and again looked up. The whole moving cloud had lowered to a distinguishable distance.

“Why, they’re all grasshoppers!” she exclaimed; and indeed so true was the observation and so rapidly were the grasshoppers settling that the boy and girl were obliged to turn their backs and shield their faces from the storm.

The cattle also, annoyed by the myriads of insects settling upon them, began to move about restlessly and presently to mill slowly around, threshing with their heads from side to side while they whipped their flanks with their tails. 8

“I didn’t know they came like this!” the girl said, as Luther’s pony sidled over toward her.

“What’d you say?” the boy demanded, leaning forward to catch her reply.

“I said I didn’t know they came like this,” the girl shouted, raising her voice to make herself heard above the rasping noise of many wings. “Father read out of the *Prairie Farmer* last week that they was hatching out in the south.”

The two drifted apart and circled about the herd again. The cattle were growing more restless and began to move determinedly away from the oncoming swarm. To keep them in the centre of the section, and away from the cornfields, the girl whipped her horse into a gallop.

Without paying the slightest attention to either her voice or her whip, half blinded in fact by the cutting wings of the grasshoppers, the irritated cattle began to move faster and, before either boy or girl knew what was happening, were in full trot toward the north. Seeing that the matter was becoming serious, Luther lent all the aid of which he was capable and circled about the herd, shouting with all his strength, but the cattle, contending against countless numbers of smaller things and unable to look steadily in any direction because of the little wings which cut like the blades of many saws, stumbled blindly against his horse if he got in their way, and, shifting around him, went on. 9

The girl was beside herself with trouble and anxiety. Lashing her horse one minute, and the nearest cow the next, she raged up and down in front of the herd, bending all her energies toward deflecting her charges from their course, but the struggle was useless.

Seeing that they could do nothing, Luther caught her horse by the bit as she passed him and shouted explanations in her ear.

“Let ’em go, Lizzie! You can’t stop ’em! I’ll have t’ come with you! We’ll just follow ’em up!”

“But they’re going to get into that field right off if we don’t get them turned!” the girl cried in distress, pulling down her long scoop-like bonnet and holding it together to keep the grasshoppers out of her face while they talked.

The cattle now broke into a run. There was nothing to do but follow, as Luther had advised. But the exasperated beasts were not looking for fodder and paid no attention to the corn. They were not out on a picnicking expedition; they were escaping from this tormenting swarm of insects which settled on itching back and horns and tail, settled anywhere that a sufficiently broad surface presented itself. Having started to run, they ran on and on and on. The boy and girl followed, their horses stumbling blindly over the ridges between which the corn was growing. The grayish brown sod, through which the matted white roots of the grass showed plainly, lay in fine lines down the long field, their irregular edges causing horses and cattle to go down on their knees frequently as they ran. But though the cattle sometimes fell, they were as quickly up and pushed blindly ahead, neither knowing nor caring where they were going, their only instinct being to get away. 10

Not a breath of air was in motion except such as was stirred by the wings of the grasshoppers or was blown from the hot nostrils of the harassed cattle. They passed through the cornfield, over a stubblefield beyond, through a slough, another stubblefield, and on to the open prairie of another section of “Railroad land.” The boy and girl made no further attempt to guide them. A cow, with the tickling feet of half a dozen of these devils of torment on the end of a bare, wet nose, was in no state of mind to be argued with, and the tossing horns, threshing about to free the head from the pests, were to be taken into sober account. All they could do was to let the maddened beasts take their own course.

For an hour, helpless to prevent the stampede, desiring nothing now but to keep the cattle in sight, the weary, sunbaked children trudged along in the rear of the herd, following through fields cut and uncut, over the short grass of the hills or the long bluestem of the hollows, their horses sweating profusely, their own faces too parched to emit moisture, conscious only of the business of following the panting herd and of avoiding the pitfalls under their horses’ feet.

At last the cattle came to a walk. The heat of the day and the unusual exertion had told upon them. Occasionally a tongue lolled from the mouth of some wearied beast, but it was not permitted even that respite for long; the grasshoppers respected no part of the bovine anatomy, and with an angry snort and an annoyed toss of the head the tongue would be withdrawn. 11

The perspiring cattle seemed so fatigued that the despairing children thought at last that they

might be turned toward home, but though whips and voices were used to the utmost the nettled beasts could not be made to face the stinging devils which settled thicker and ever thicker about them. They came down to a walk, but they walked doggedly toward the north. At last the sun's rays began to peep through. The air soon cleared, and the scorched and burning children began to wish for even a cloud of grasshoppers to protect them from the heat. Wherever the light fell it disclosed moving masses of locusts which covered the entire face of the landscape. The teeming cloud of insects was a pest equal to that of the lice of Egypt. They overflowed the Kansas prairies like the lava from Mount Vesuvius, burying vegetation and causing every living thing to flee from their path.

At last the storm spent itself. The sun came out clear, and as hot as molten brass. The cattle could hold out no longer. The swarms which flew up in front of their moving feet were as unbearable as any that had come from above. The exhausted beasts gave up and permitted themselves to be headed toward home.

"I began to think they wouldn't stop till they had reached the State line," the girl said with a relieved sigh, when they were safely started down the first road they came upon after turning south again. 12

Luther made no reply. He had stopped the pony and was watching the inroads of numberless scissor-like mouths on a stub of corn near the roadside. The tassel was gone, the edges of the leaves were eaten away, and lines of hungry insects hung to the centre rib of each blade, gnawing and cutting at every inch of the stem.

"Th' won't be a cornstalk left standin' by night," Luther observed as the girl rode up to see what it was that attracted his attention. "Crackie! but I'm glad pap's sold out. It'd be no shoes for me this winter if we didn't get away," he added, spitefully brushing a grasshopper from the end of his nose and rubbing the injured member.

The girl's face fell at the mention of hard times. Times were always hard in the Farnshaw home, but she could never get accustomed to them, and each new phase of the trouble was a blow. The sensitive child already carried a load of financial worry which was tugging at every pleasure her young life craved.

"Won't we have any corn at all?" she cried in dismay.

"I don't know," Luther answered dubiously. "It'll be starvin' times about here. You better get your folks t' sell out and go East too," he said, without looking up.

The child's fear of financial disaster was eased by the prospect of "goin' East." The "East" was the fairyland of her dreams, the childhood's home of her father, who was a good story-teller when he was not irritated, the Mecca and Medina of all the pilgrimages of all their little world. 13 To go East was to be a travelled person, to attain distinction, just the next best thing in fact to being made President of the United States. To go East was to live near the timber, where one could wander for hours, days, ages, in the cool freshness of its shady paths. The sunburned child, with her jug hanging by a strap from the saddle horn, had a swift, rapturous vision of alluring, mossy banks, canopied by rustling leaves, before she was called back to the stern hills of her native Kansas and the sterner necessity of forcing a hundred head of maddened cattle to keep within the confines of an illy defined road.

By the time they had ridden ahead and crowded the cattle down to the right of way again, the child's natural good sense and business instincts had combined to temporarily shatter the dream.

"Nobody 'd buy us out if there ain't nothing to feed the cattle," she said, watching the boy's face eagerly in the hope that he would reassure her.

When he did not speak, she added, with discouraged conviction, "Pa wouldn't sell out anyhow; ma's been trying to get him to for a year."

"He'll have to. You won't be able t' stay if there's nothin' t' feed," the lad said with emphasis, and then added with a giggle, "I bet th' Cranes is mad for bein' in such a hurry t' get in. They paid pap th' money last night, an' made 'im promise t' give possession 'fore t'morrow night. Three hundred dollars! Th' old woman took it out of 'er stockin'."

"Three hundred dollars!" Lizzie Farnshaw repeated, whirling her horse about suddenly at the 14 mention of a sum of money which ran into hundreds. She looked at the boy enviously. She was but fourteen, and did not realize that more than three hundred acres of fertile land had been exchanged for the sum. Her spirits rose as they turned to follow the cattle again. Perhaps, as Luther had said, they would have to sell out also. The dream of going East absorbed her once more. As she dreamed, however, a shrewd eye was kept on the cattle. As nearly as possible she lived up to the trust reposed in her. Quick to serve, sensitive, honest, dependable as she was, these cattle constituted the point of contact between the developing girl and her developing philosophy of life. Duty pointed sternly to the undesired task, and duty was writ large on the pages of Lizzie Farnshaw's monotonous life. Her hands and face had browned thickly at its bidding, but though, as she had remarked a couple of hours before, she should crack like the sunbaked earth beneath her feet, she would not fail in her obligation to keep the cattle out of other men's fields, and her father out of the primitive courts where damages could be assessed. Poverty she had always known, but now they were threatened with a new and more dreadful form of it than any hitherto encountered, a fact of which courts took no cognizance. Hope and fear alternated in her heart as she rode along, but for the most part the young life in her clung to the idea of the Eastern trip. Hope springs eternal in the child heart. Perhaps after all they

would have to leave Kansas, as Luther had said. If only——. In spite of the arguments of good sense she clung to the idea. She was glad Luther was there. In her simple way she had told her plans, her hopes, and her fears to Luther's willing ears ever since she had known him: she did so now. A Maggie Tulliver in her own family, Luther was the one compensating feature of her life. Luther not only understood but was interested. His tallow-candle face and faded hair were those of the—in that country—much despised Swede, but the child saw the gentle spirit shining out of his kindly blue eyes. Luther was her oracle, and she quoted his words so often at home that it was a family joke.

Luther Hansen was the only preacher to whom Lizzie Farnshaw ever listened. Her Sundays had been spent on the prairies from choice. Mrs. Farnshaw mourned over what she considered her daughter's unregenerate condition, but Mr. Farnshaw was quite willing that the child should herd the cattle if she preferred it to spending an hour at "meetin'." Luther, who also until this year had herded his father's cattle and who usually spent the long days with the girl, had quaint ways of looking at religious questions which was a never-ending source of delight and interest to her. Their problems at home as well as at school were subjects of common discussion. He had been the beginning and the end of her social life. Now she took him into her dream of going away, and discussed her ideas of the best way of disposing of the stock by sale or gift, the sort of home she would have with her grandparents, and pictured, with a vivid imagination, the woods and streams she had heard her father describe. If she only could go! They stopped at every field to watch the voracious insects, which were eating every green thing upon which they happened to alight. A turnip patch on the corner of the Farnshaw place which had been straggling, but green, when the cattle had passed through it that afternoon, had not a leaf to show as they returned. The ground was dotted all over the patch with small holes where the hungry swarms, not satisfied with the tops, had followed the stems down into the earth, eating out the bulbs to the very taproots.

They drove the cattle across to the usual feeding place, but the grasshoppers flew up in continuous clouds before every moving object, and it was impossible for them to eat.

"Why don't you take them in and shut them up?" Luther asked when he saw that the herd was so restless that the child could not manage them alone.

"Pa wouldn't let me," she sighed, and continued to ride around her charges.

Luther had intended going home long before this, but he knew that Lizzie could not control the restless cattle, and so he stayed with her, rather glad of the excuse to do so. Josiah Farnshaw's temper was a matter of neighbourhood knowledge. A word of explanation to his father, Luther knew, would be all that he would need to make the fact of his absence commendable. He was glad of any excuse which would leave him with Lizzie Farnshaw for an extra hour, but he was to find that hour disappointing, for the cattle were restless and kept them both in constant motion.

When at last the time came to corral the stock a new calamity was discovered. The cattle wandered into the edge of a field of flax as they neared the barn. Luther, following them, dropped from the back of his pony and stopped to examine the grain. The girl was excitedly getting the straying animals crowded on toward the pens and it was not till she had the gate shut fast on them that she could take time to join him.

"What is it?" she asked as she rode up.

The lanky boy, who was really a man, measured the field slowly with his eye, calculating the damage before he answered slowly:

"Kicked it out o' th' pods flyin' through. Must 'a' been twenty acres. What made you let it get s' ripe for? It ought t' been cut three days ago, anyhow."

The girl was out of her saddle in an instant. She walked into the body of the field somewhat, her face quivering pitifully as she examined the grain for herself. It was only too true! The beautiful brown seeds carpeted the earth around the roots of the flax, but no amount of harvesting would ever gather so much as a handful. The crop was a total loss.

"Poor ma!" she cried, when convinced beyond a doubt of the empty bolls. With the eyes of the prematurely old, she saw the extent of the ruin, and she knew what would be its effect upon the mother who seldom knew joy.

The loss of the turnips had seemed bad enough, but while watching the green things about her disappear it had not occurred to the child that the grasshoppers would eat the dry and, as Luther had said, overripe stems of the flax. Still less had it occurred to her that the insignificant wings and feet of such small things could do damage to an entire field by merely flying through it.

That flax was of paramount importance in the family calculations just now. In her considerations of the prospective move to the East, the price of this flax had figured largely. Family discussions had centred about that field for weeks. It was the one definite starting point in the bickerings about their weak and indefinite plans for the future. The loss of every other family asset could not have undone the child's faith in the ultimate good of things so overwhelmingly. She choked back a sob as she mounted her horse again.

"Poor ma!" she repeated. "Pa told her she could have the money from the flax to go and see grandma on. You know grandma's old, and they think she can't live through the winter. That's one reason why I was so glad when I thought we were going to have to go East to live. She don't hardly know her own children any more, I hope ma don't know about the flax; She'll be sure to have one of her spells, and she's just got over one. Ain't it awful?"

Luther feared she was going to cry, and, man fashion, prepared to flee.

"I've got t' go, Lizzie," he said, and awkwardly held out his hand.

All thought of the flax disappeared from the girl's mind.

"Oh, Luther!" she exclaimed in new distress, "won't I ever see you again?"

The thought was so overwhelming that her tears came now from quite a different cause, and the frank eyes threatened to overflow as she stood clasping his bony hand in hers insistently. "What will I do without you?" she sobbed.

The unexpected question and the unexpected tears had an uncomfortable effect on the boy. He grew suddenly embarrassed and drew his hand away.

Some indefinable thing about the action made her conscious that there was a change in his feelings. It checked her rising emotions and made her curious. What was he embarrassed about? The girl stole a look at him, which left him still more disturbed and uneasy. It was an intangible thing upon which she could not remark and yet could not fail to recognize. Luther had never been awkward in her presence before. Their association had been of the most offhand and informal character. As a boy of fifteen he had carried her, a girl of eleven, over many a snowbank their first winter of school in the Prairie Home school district. They had herded cattle together, waded the shallow ponds and hunted for mussel shells, and until this year they had seen each other daily. This year Luther had taken a man's place in the fields and the girl had seen him at rare intervals. She was not conscious of the change which this year of dawning adolescence had brought to them both. Luther had developed a growing need of a razor on his thin, yellow face, while she, four years younger, had also matured. The outgrown calico dress she wore was now halfway to her knees, its sleeves exposed some inches of sunburned wrists, and the scanty waist disclosed a rapidly rounding form. Young womanhood was upon her, unknown to her, and but now discovered by Luther Hansen. For the first time Luther felt the hesitancy of a youth in the presence of a maid.

"I shall miss you *so!*" the girl said, looking at him, puzzled by the indefinable something in his manner which was a new element in their communications.

Her frank curiosity put the boy utterly to rout. The blood surged to his pale face and pounded in the veins under his ears, half choking him; it cut short the leave-taking and left the child bewildered and half hurt.

She watched the calico pony lope away in a cloud of scurrying grasshoppers and wondered in a child-like way what could have happened. This abrupt and confused departure increased the loneliness she felt. He was her one real friend, and her tears came again as she turned toward the house.

There was little time given the child to indulge her feelings, or to speculate upon a friend's confusion or adieus, for a sharp voice summoned her to the house and fresh duties.

"When I call you I want you to step spry," was the greeting the child received from the stooped figure putting the potatoes over the fire to fry, as she entered the door.

Mrs. Farnshaw had her head tied up in a white cloth; "the spell" had arrived. It was no time to tell of the loss of the flax, and Luther's going was not mentioned, because Mrs. Farnshaw shared the public contempt for his nationality and had failed to get her daughter's confidence in that quarter.

"Here, set this table for me; I'm clear done out. Did you ever hear of such a crazy thing as all them hoppers comin' down like bees? Your pa's gone over to Hansen's t' see what he thinks. Looks 's if we'd be harder up 'n ever, an' I thought I'd done 'bout all th' savin' a woman could do a'ready. I'm goin' t' get right off t' mother's soon's ever we can sell that flax. If I don't, we'll be havin' t' use th' money for feed."

Her daughter made no reply. It was no time, when her mother was having one of her periodical sick-headaches, to let it be known that there was no flax to sell. That flax had been one long series of troublesome worries, to which the total loss was a fittingly tragic end. The restless grasshoppers outside were forgotten.

Some weeks before, Mr. Farnshaw had given a grudging consent to the use of the proceeds from the flax crop for a trip' to his wife's old home while her mother yet lived. Josiah Farnshaw's temper was an uncertain quantity. Had Mrs. Farnshaw been wise she would have dropped all reference to the flax when the promise was obtained. But Mrs. Farnshaw had to talk; it was her fate. She had hovered about the field, she had centred her faculties on the considerations of harvesting, and prices. She laboriously and obviously collected eggs, skimped the family on its supply of butter, and had counted her chickens to see how many she could sacrifice for the purchase of "a decent bit of black."

As she sewed upon the premature emblems of her coming woe, she had discussed the desirability of threshing out of the shock instead of waiting for the stack to go through the sweating process; she talked, talked, talked, with an endless clacking, till her husband fled from her presence or cut her short with an oath. He wished he had never planted flax, he wished he had never heard of it, he wished—he hardly knew what he did wish, but he was sick of flax.

Crops of all sorts were shortened by continued drought; corn would be an utter failure. He had given notes for a new harvester and other machinery while the prospects for crops were good, and the knowledge that implement dealers would collect those notes whether the yield of grain

was equal to their demands or not tightened the set lines about his naturally stern mouth and irritated a temper never good at the best. Daily he became more obstinate and unapproachable.

Josiah Farnshaw was not only obstinate, he was surly. Nothing could induce him to show any interest in the flax field after he found that his wife was looking out for its advantages. If she suggested that they go to examine it, he was instantly busy. If she asked when he intended to begin the cutting, he was elaborately indifferent and replied, “When its ripe; there’s plenty of time.” When at last the field showed a decided tendency to brown, he helped a neighbour 23
instead of beginning on Friday, as his wife urged. Saturday he found something wrong with the binder. By Saturday night he began to see that the grain was ripening fast. He was warned and was ready to actually start the machine early the next day. His grizzled face concealed the grin it harboured at the idea of running the harvester on Sunday; he knew Mrs. Farnshaw’s scruples. The flax had ripened, almost overnight, because of the extreme heat. Torn with anxiety and the certain knowledge that haste was necessary, Mrs. Farnshaw quoted scripture and hesitated. Her husband, who had delayed in all possible ways up to this time, and had refused to listen to her advice, became suddenly anxious to do “that cuttin’.” Now that his wife hesitated from principle, he was intensely anxious to move contrary to her scruples.

The knowledge that her husband was enjoying her indecision, and that he was grimly thinking that her religious scruples would not stand the test, made her even less able to decide a question than usual.

The game was getting exciting and he let her argue, urging with pretended indifference that, “That flax’s dead ripe now an’ if it shatters out on th’ ground you kin blame yourself,” adding with grim humour, “There’s nothin’ like th’ sound of money t’ bring folks t’ their senses. It’s good as a pinch of pepper under th’ nose of a bulldog.”

There was everything to point that way, but a woman and a mother must vindicate her claims to religion, and Mrs. Farnshaw refused to give her consent to the Sunday harvesting. 24

Torn between her desire to save every grain of the precious crop and the fear of a hell that burned with fire and brimstone, her husband’s scorn did what neither had been able to do. Mrs. Farnshaw forbade the machine being taken to the field, and then cried herself into a headache.

“Do as you please; it’s your lookout, but I tell you It’ll be a sick lookin’ field by to-morrow mornin’,” was Mr. Farnshaw’s final shot.

When her decision was finally reached, Mr. Farnshaw became alarmed. He knew he had let the flax go too long uncut. He had half believed in the reasons he had given for delay up to this point, but suddenly realizing that the overripe grain would suffer great loss if left another day in the hot sun, he reasoned with real earnestness that it must be cut if it were to be saved. His wife, thoroughly convinced that he was still tormenting her and that he would never let her hear the last of the matter if she gave up, closed her lips down firmly and declined to allow it to be done.

All this the child had heard argued out that morning. It was a cruel position in which to place one of her years. Part of it she had comprehended, part had escaped her, but she was sensitive to the atmosphere of suffering. The details of past elements in the tragedy she could not be expected to understand. The stunted, barren life of her mother was but half guessed. What child could know of the heartsick longing for affection and a but little understood freedom, the daily 25
coercion, the refusal of her husband to speak kindly or to meet her eye with a smile?

The sorely puzzled and bewildered woman thought affection was withheld from her because of something done or undone, and strove blindly to achieve it by acts, not knowing that acts have little, if anything, to do with affection. She strove daily to win love, not knowing that love is a thing outside the power to win or bestow. Had she had understanding she would have spared the child with whom she worked; instead, she talked on with her dreary whine, morbidly seeking a sympathy of which she did not know how to avail herself when it was so plainly hers.

With a lump in her throat of which the mother did not even suspect, Lizzie Farnshaw set the table, cut the bread, brought the water, “put up the chairs,” and, when her father came from the stable, slipped out to where he was washing for supper and whispered about the flax, asking him not to mention it while her mother was suffering with the headache.

The news was not news to Josiah Farnshaw, who had examined the field anxiously as he had returned from Hansen’s. Sobered by the loss, he was less disagreeable than usual and only pushed his daughter out of his way as he reached around her for the sun-cracked bar of yellow laundry soap with which to wash his hands. Thankful to have the unpleasant but important matter, as she thought, safely attended to, the child returned to help lift the meal to the bare kitchen table. 26

The illy lighted room, with its one small window, was dim and dismal in the dusk of evening. In spite of the added heat it would produce, the child decided that a light was necessary.

After the kerosene lamp was lighted, she turned to see if her mother needed her help again. The crooked blaze ran up unexpectedly and blacked the cracked chimney on one side with a soot so thick that one half of the room was soon in semi-darkness. Mrs. Farnshaw took it fretfully in hand.

“Why can’t you trim it when you see it runnin’ up that way?” she demanded querulously, poking at the lopsided and deeply charred wick with a sliver obtained from the side of the wood-box.

Her ministrations were not very successful, however, for when the chimney was replaced it ran

up on the other side, and in the end her daughter had to prosecute a search for the scissors and cut the wick properly. As they worked over the ill-smelling light, Albert, the youngest of the three children of the household, burst into the kitchen crying excitedly:

“Ma, did you know that th’ flax was all whipped out of th’ pods on to the ground?”

Mrs. Farnshaw, who had received the lamp from her daughter’s hand, let it fall on the edge of an upturned plate in her excitement, and then, seeing what she had done, fumbled blindly in a terrified effort to right it before it should go over. The cracked chimney fell from its moorings, and, striking a teacup, spattered broken glass over the table like hailstones. The entire family 27
scrambled to save the lamp itself from a similar fate and were plunged into darkness by the girl blowing out its flame to save an explosion.

The excitement of the moment served, temporarily, to lessen the blow of Albert’s announcement, but by the time “a dip” had been constructed the full weight of the disaster had fallen upon the defeated and despairing woman, and to protect her from the taunts of the head of the house, Lizzie induced her to go to bed, where she sobbed throughout the night.

The next day was hot and windy. The grasshoppers, unable to fly in a strong wind, clung to the weeds, to the dry grass, the stripped branches of the half-grown trees, to the cattle and hogs upon which they happened to alight, and even to people themselves, unless brushed off.

Lizzie took the cattle out to the usual grazing ground, but there was no Luther to help, and the grasshoppers made the lives of the restless animals so unendurable that in real alarm, lest they run away again, she took them home, preferring her father’s wrath to the experience of getting them back if they should get beyond her control. Fortune favoured her. Unable to endure the demonstrations of grief at home, her father had taken himself to a distant neighbour’s to discuss the “plague of locusts.”

The wind blew a gale throughout the day, sweeping remorselessly over the unobstructed hillsides. Unable to fly, the helpless insects hugged the earth while the gale tore over the Kansas prairies with a fearful velocity. With feminine instinct, every female grasshopper 28
burrowed into the dry earth, making a hole which would receive almost her entire body back of her wings and legs. The spring sod, half rotted and loosened from the grass roots, furnished the best lodgment. In each hole, as deep down as her body could reach, her pouch of eggs was deposited.

No attempt was made to cover the hole, and by night the sod presented a honeycombed appearance never before seen by the oldest settlers. Having performed nature’s functions, and provided for the propagation of their kind, the lately fecund grasshoppers were hungry when the act was over. Not a spear of anything green was left. The travel-worn horde had devoured everything in sight the day before. Evening closed in upon a restless and excited swarm of starving insects, but they were unable to fly at night or while the wind was blowing.

It was necessary to find food; hunger’s pangs may not be suffered long by creatures whose active life is numbered in weeks. The high wind had cooled the air and made the locusts stupid and sleepy, but when the next morning the wind had fallen, and the sun had warmed their bodies, as fast as they were able all were on the wing, headed for the north. The air was calm, and by ten o’clock they were away in swarms, leaving ruin and desolation to show that they had sojourned in the land.

The situation was truly desperate. Cattle, horses, and hogs were without food of any sort. Many families were new to the country and had depended upon sod-corn for the winter’s supply of 29
provender for both man and beast. Mr. Farnshaw, being one of the older residents, had grown a crop of wheat, so that his bread was assured; but the herd of cattle which had been his delight was now a terrorizing burden. Cattle and horses could not live on wheat, and there was no hay because of the dry weather. What was to be done?

That night the neighbours held a consultation at the Farnshaw house, where grizzled and despairing men discussed the advisability of “goin’ East,” and ways and means of getting there. The verdict was strongly in favour of going.

Mrs. Farnshaw brightened. Perhaps, after all, she would get away from these wind-blown prairies, where no shade offered its protecting presence against a sun which took life and spirits out of the pluckiest of them. Even more childish than the daughter at her side, Mrs. Farnshaw clapped her hands with joy as she leaned forward expectantly to address her new neighbour.

“If I can only get t’ my mother’s, I won’t care for nothin’ after that. My heart goes out t’ Mrs. Crane. Think of all that good money goin’ t’ them Swedes! You just better pocket your loss an’ get away while you can.”

“You’re goin’ too, then, Farnshaw?” the new neighbour asked.

All eyes turned upon Mr. Farnshaw, who had not as yet expressed himself on either side. These neighbours had asked to assemble in his house because his kitchen afforded more room than any other house in the vicinity, the kitchen being a large room with no beds in it to take up floor 30
space.

Mrs. Farnshaw realized as soon as the question was asked that her joy had been premature.

Josiah Farnshaw sat with his chair tilted back on two legs against the wall, snapping the blade of his pocket knife back and forth as he considered what he was going to say in reply. He felt all eyes turned in his direction and quite enjoyed the suspense. Mr. Farnshaw was an artist in calculating the suspense of others. He gave them plenty of time to get their perspective before

he replied. At last he shut the blade of the knife down ostentatiously, replaced it in his trousers' pocket, and announced slowly:

"Well, sir, as for me and mine, I think we'll stay right here."

Mrs. Farnshaw gave a despairing, "Oh!" and covered her face with her hands to strangle back her tears. Her one hope had been that poverty would accomplish what the flax had failed to do.

"Why—I thought you said there'd be nothin' t' feed an' you'd have t'," said a man whose shaggy whiskers had not seen a comb that year. "What'll you do? You can't see things starve!"

"I thought you was strong for goin'. What'll you do with all your stock?" another said, and all bent forward and waited for his answer as if he could find a way out of the tangle for them.

"That's just it." Again he paused, enjoying the suspense that his silence created. Mr. Farnshaw 31
was not popular, but he had more stock than all his simple neighbours put together and was conscious that money, or its equivalent, had weight. "That's just it," he repeated to add emphasis to his opinion. "What is a man to do? You folks that have nothin' but your teams an' wagons can load th' family in an' get away. How'd I feel 'bout th' time that I got t' th' Missouri River if I knowed all them hogs an' cattle was layin' around here too weak t' get up cause they hadn't been fed?"

He dropped his argument into the midst of them and then sat back and enjoyed its effect. He had intended to go till ten minutes previous. The argument sounded good to him now, however. It put him on a higher basis with himself, in spite of the fact that it had only popped into his head while he was clicking his knife blade. He conceived a new liking for himself. "No, sir," he continued; "I'll stay by it."

"I don't see as your stayin' helps anything if you ain't got nothin' t' feed," was the reiterated objection.

"Well," Mr. Farnshaw replied, careful not to look in his wife's direction, "I was for goin' at first, but I've listened t' you folks an' I've come t' th' conclusion that you ain't goin' t' better yourselves any. If you go East, You'll have t' come back here in th' spring, or live on day's work there—an'—an' I'll take my chances right here. It's a long lane that has no turn. Grasshoppers can't stay always."

"What'll you do if all them eggs hatch out an' eat th' crops in th' spring?" the new neighbour 32
asked, determined to look on all sides of the question before he decided to give up his recently purchased farm, and glad of this opportunity to get the opinions of his fellow sufferers on that particular phase of his unexpected calamity. "What'll you do with all that bunch of cattle, anyhow?" he added.

"I'll share what I've got with th' stuff, an' if part of it dies I'll drag it out on th' hill t' rot; th' rest I'll stay by," was the stubborn reply. "As for them eggs a-hatchin', they'll be good ones if they can stand a Kansas winter; they'll do a blamed sight better'n any eggs Mrs. Farnshaw gethers in. They'd better go south."

This raised a laugh. The grim humour of anything, that could get away, spending a winter in Kansas, appealed to these grizzly pioneers, who struggled with the question of fuel in a country where there was little natural timber, and coal must be paid for before it was burned. But all their arguments would not turn him from his course.

"Your wife's turrible set on goin', Farnshaw," one of the men said to him as they went to the stable for their horses when the meeting broke up.

"Women's always wantin' things," was the indifferent reply. "Say, you've got a stack of wheat straw. What'll you take for it?"

In the house the sympathetic daughter helped her mother prepare for bed.

"I thought sure to-night we'd get to go," the child said. "If you could get back East you might get to stay; and then you wouldn't have to cry so much," she added as she picked up the 33
abandoned clothing her mother had left lying on the floor.

Mrs. Farnshaw, who was turning the same matter over disconsolately as she sat on the side of the bed, shook her head with the bitter certainty that her fate would pursue her, and replied hopelessly:

"It wouldn't make no difference, I guess, Lizzie. He'd be there, an' it'd be just the same."

And the girl, who was naturally reflective, carried with her to the loft overhead that night a new idea: that it was not the place, but the manner in which lives were lived, which mattered.

The preparations for the coming of that winter were the strangest ever witnessed in a farming community. Never had any man known fuel to be so scarce. Cornstalks, which were usually staple articles for fuel in that country, had been eaten almost to the very ground, but the stubs were gathered, the dirt shaken from them, and they were then carted to the house. Rosin weeds were collected and piled in heaps. The dried dung of cattle, scattered over the grazing lands, and called "buffalo chips," was stored in long ricks, also, and used sparingly, for even this simple fuel was so scarce as to necessitate care in its use.

To keep out the driving winds, the houses were banked with sods and earth halfway to the roofs. With so little material for keeping warm, and that of the lightest variety, it was necessary to make the living quarters impervious to the never-ceasing winds which tore at the thin walls of 34
the unprotected houses that sheltered such folk as were hardy enough to remain.

It was impossible to build sheds for all the stock, so the hogs were allowed to swarm under the feet of the horses tied in the straw stable, and many and sad were the accidents to the smaller animals. It was soon clear that not many of them could be carried through till the spring. Seeing that they lost weight rapidly, as many as were full grown were killed and their flabby carcasses salted away to be eaten.

Fortunately, the grasshoppers had not arrived in Kansas till after the small grain had been nearly all cut, so that there was considerable oat and wheat straw in the country. Mr. Farnshaw bargained for every straw stack he could find, but straw was a poor substitute for the corn and hay to which the cattle were accustomed, and as the weeks lengthened into months, and winter closed in, the unprotected cattle grew thinner and ever thinner. Corn was quoted in the markets at a dollar a bushel, but in fact was not to be had at any price. Iowa had had a drought, and Illinois was the nearest base of supplies, and as it was generally known that there was no money west of the Missouri River, no grain was sent to Kansas.

Finding that the horses did not thrive on the straw alone, and knowing that wheat would very quickly kill them, Mr. Farnshaw put away a sufficient amount of oats for seed and then carefully portioned out the rest to be fed to four of his best broodmares, hoping to be able to put in the spring crops with them as well as to save the coming colts of two. The rest, he decided, must take their chances on getting through the winter alive.

The family food consisted largely of bread and the slabs of thin meat, with a sort of coffee made from browned rye. As a “company dish” there was a scanty supply of sweet corn, dried before the drought had cut the crop short. There were no eggs, because the chickens had sickened from eating grasshoppers in the fall and nearly all had died. The few hens which remained clung to the limbs of the half-grown cottonwood trees throughout the long winter nights, and found barely food enough during the day to keep life in their fuzzy bodies, which could not even furnish the oil necessary to lay their feathers smooth, much less foster the growth of eggs.

Josiah Farnshaw secretly questioned the propriety of having remained in that desolate territory when, as spring approached, the shrunken cows died one after another in giving birth to the calves which had matured in their slowly perishing bodies, but he made no sign or admission of the fact.

It was a season of gloom such as our frontier states had never known, and to add to the general depression there was a growing conviction that the hatching of the grasshoppers’ eggs when warm weather came would complete the famine.

To support his action in refusing to go East, Josiah Farnshaw asserted stubbornly that the frost of their hard winter would certainly kill the larvae of the locusts. So persistent was his attitude that at short intervals throughout the entire winter rumours that “th’ hopper eggs is dead ’s doornails” stirred the community and set its members to making tests in a vain endeavour to establish their truth. Pieces of earth, honeycombed with the tiny nests, would be placed near the fire and kept at as regular a degree of warmth as possible, the condition of the eggs would be noted carefully, and in a short time the hopes of the anxious pioneers would be dashed to the ground by wriggling little insects climbing cheerfully out of their winter quarters and hopping about in a vain search for something green to live upon. Often, in sheer desperation, the harassed settler would sweep the hatching brood into the fire, remarking as he did so, “Burnin’s too good for such pests,” and always fear gripped the heart. If the crops in spring were eaten, other homes must be sought, and all knew that the weakened horses were unfit for travel. In fact, no team in that entire country was fit to travel far or fast, except the two which Mr. Farnshaw groomed and fed so carefully for the sake of the spring work and the much desired colts.

The depression and worries of the Farnshaw home increased the spirit of contention and distrust of its guardians. The husband daily grew surlier and more unpleasant and the wife more lachrymose and subject to “spells.” The children learned to avoid the presence of either parent as much as possible, and to look outside the home for the joy childhood demands. The chores were heavy and difficult, but could at least be performed in the open light of God’s great out-of-doors, where the imagination could people the world with pleasant features and pleasant prospects.

The cattle were driven daily to the ponds, half a mile away, for water, and if the ice was thick and the axe-handle benumbing to the mittened hands as they chopped the holes for the tottering animals to drink from, there was the prospect of a slide on the uncut portions of the ice later; and as the plucky youngsters followed the cattle home they dreamed of skates to be obtained in the dim future, and tried to run fast enough to keep warm. The blessing of childhood is that it cannot be cheated of its visions, and the blood of adolescence was coursing riotously through the veins of the daughter of the Farnshaw house. If her hands were cold when she returned to the barnyard, after watering the cattle, she beat them about her shoulders or held them against the shrunken flank of some dumb animal, or blew her breath through the fingers of her knitted mittens; but her thoughts were of other things.

It is an old saying that “God helps them who help themselves,” and in the case of Lizzie Farnshaw the axiom became a living truth. While the rest of her family suffered and magnified their sufferings, she, by a vivid imagination, placed herself in the path of fortune and obtained the thing she demanded. The simple country schoolhouse that year, dreary and cheerless enough to the pert Miss who had come out from Topeka to teach there, and incidentally to collect twenty-five dollars a month from the school board, was to be the scene of the initial change in Lizzie Farnshaw’s life.

Verily, God helps them who help themselves, and Lizzie Farnshaw proved the old saw by laying hold of and absorbing every new idea and mannerism of which the new teacher was arrogantly possessed—absorbed them, but transmuted them, winnowing out the coarse, the sarcastic, the unkind, and making of what was left a substance of finer fibre.

The number of children in the Prairie Home school that year was limited to five, the rest having departed for the indefinable land known as the “East.” Three of these children came from the Farnshaw home and the other two from the new neighbours, the Cranes, on the Hansen place.

Sadie Crane hated the new teacher with all the might that her pinched little twelve-year-old body could bring to bear. She saw only the snippish, opinionated, young peacock, and the self-assurance which came from the empty-headed ability to tie a ribbon well. She was so occupied with resenting the young teacher’s feeling of vast superiority that she failed to understand, as did the Farnshaw child, that along with all that vainglorious assumption went a real knowledge of some things with which it was valuable to become acquainted.

To the spiteful Crane child the schoolma’am was “stuck-up,” while to the imaginative daughter of the Farnshaw house she was a bird of paradise, and though Lizzie was conscious that the teacher’s voice was harsh, and her air affected, the child reached out like a drowning man toward this symbol of the life she coveted. To her the new teacher was a gift from heaven itself. 39

This young girl from Topeka brought into activity every faculty the sensitive, ambitious child possessed.

Lizzie Farnshaw laid hold, with a strong hand, upon every blessing which came in her way. She knew that the foppish young thing at the teacher’s desk was “stuck-up,” but Lizzie was willing that she should be whatever she chose, so long as it was possible to live near her, to study her, and to become like the best that was in her.

The teacher’s matter-of-fact assumption that no self-respecting person failed to obtain a high-school education was a good thing for the country girl, however overdrawn it might be. Lizzie Farnshaw listened and built air-castles. To this one child, out of that entire community, the idea appealed alluringly. But for her castles in Spain she must have burst with her unexpressed desires. To add fuel to the fires of her fancy, Mr. Farnshaw also fell under the fascinations of the school teacher and boasted in the bosom of his family that “Lizzie’s just as smart as that Topeka girl any day,” and when his daughter began to talk hopefully about teaching school it appealed to the father’s pride, and he encouraged her dreams. He had been the leading man in the community since coming to Kansas because of the number of cattle he had been able to accumulate. A small legacy had aided in that accumulation, and it appealed to his pride to have his daughter’s intellectual ambitions adding to the general family importance. Pride is an important factor in the lives of all, but to the children of the farm it is an ambrosia, which once 40
sipped is never forgotten and to obtain which many strange sacrifices will be made. Mr. Farnshaw usually regarded a request from his children as a thing to be denied promptly, and always as a matter for suspicion. Yet here he was, considering soberly, yea pleasurably, a move involving money, at a time when money was more than usually scarce. His assent was even of such a nature as to deceive both himself and the child into thinking that it was being done for her benefit!

The young girl received a new impetus toward improvement. The family began to regard her as a member set apart, as one from whom special things were to be expected. From being just comfortably at the head of her classes, she became more ambitious, reached over into new territory, and induced the teacher to create new classes for her benefit. The subjects required for the examination of teachers were added to those usually carried. There was a real purpose in her efforts now, and the smoky kerosene lamp burned stubbornly till late hours.

The new teacher not only listened to recitations but appealed to the artistic in the newly developing woman. She rolled her hair from neck to brow in a “French twist” and set on the top of it an “Alsatian bow,” which stood like gigantic butterfly wings across her proud head. The long basque of her school dress was made after the newest pattern and had smoke-pearl buttons, in overlapping groups of three, set on each side of its vest front. The skirt of this 41
wonderful dress was “shirred” and hung in graceful festoons between the rows of gatherings, and was of an entirely new style. Last, but not least, the teacher’s feet were shod in “side laces,” the first pair of a new kind of shoes, destined to become popular, which laced on the inside of the ankle instead of on the top as we have them now. Of all her stylish attractions this was the most absorbing. “Fool shoes,” Sadie Crane called them, and her little black eyes twinkled with a consuming spite when she mentioned them, but the ambitious Farnshaw child, reaching out for improvement and change, coveted them, and preened her own feathers, and mimicked, and dreamed. She accepted the shoes just as she accepted the teacher’s other attributes: they were better than her own.

To be better than her own—that was the measure of Lizzie Farnshaw’s demand. If the shoes, the clothing, the manners, the ideas, were better than her own they were worthy of honest consideration. The teacher’s tongue was sharp and her criticisms ruthless, but they had elements of truth in them, and even when they were directed against the child herself they were a splendid spur. The young girl copied her manners, her gait, and her vocabulary. She watched her own conversation to see that she did not say “have went” and “those kind”; she became observant of the state of her finger-nails; if she had to lace her shoes with twine string, she blackened the string with soot from the under side of the stove lids, and polished her shoes from the same source.

Mrs. Farnshaw, broken with the cold, the privations of the long winter, and the growing disappointments of her domestic life, saw nothing but overdressing and foolishness in her daughter's new attention to the details of personal appearance. Burdened with her inability to furnish the clothes the family needed, she complained monotonously over every evidence of the young girl's desire to beautify herself. When the mother's complaints became unendurable, the father usually growled out a stern, "Let the child alone," but for the most part the growing girl lived a life apart from her family, thought along different lines, and built about the future a wall they could never climb, and over whose rim they would rarely, if ever, catch a glimpse of the world within. No life, however hard, could ever tame that spirit, or grind its owner into an alien groove after that year of imaginative castle building.

CHAPTER II

BRUSHING UP TO GO TO TOPEKA

With the opening of spring and the coming of the young grass, the handful of cattle that had not died of starvation began to look healthier. A shipment of seed corn for planting, and even a stinted amount for feed, had been sent from the East in March. But for that donation even the work horses must have succumbed. Josiah Farnshaw had the best horses in the country and was suspected of having had far more help than he had really received. The two teams he had favoured all winter against the seeding season were the envy of all. Some of the old neighbours, after a winter spent with the wife's relatives in the East, had decided to return and take the chances of the grasshopper-ridden Middle West, and had come with horses able to drag the plow, but, worn from travel, most of them were practically useless.

There was a lull after the small grain was in the ground. The menacing eggs of the grasshoppers began to hatch as the sun warmed the earth. It was a period of intense anxiety. So many months had been spent in alternate intervals of hope and fear that now, since the test was actually and immediately to be made, the tension was terrific. Men rose as soon as the first light of day appeared and went to examine the tender grain, without which they could not remain upon the land which had cost so dear in the suffering of the winter just past.

A surprise was in store for them. The young insects matured rapidly. While they appeared in swarms, it was noticed that they disappeared immediately upon hatching.

Kansas began to get its breath.

Never was promise of crops more encouraging. There was a distinct note of reassurance and hopefulness in the air. What became of the grasshoppers nobody knew exactly, but they went almost as fast as they hatched. Some shook their heads and said, "Wait till hot weather."

Josiah Farnshaw moved steadily ahead with his planting. He announced that he had faith in Kansas—had always had—he'd stand on the burning deck! While others hesitated, he took advantage of wind and weather to get his crops in the ground. He had been right all along. He did not propose "to be run off of the land he had homesteaded and set with trees by any durned little bugs he'd ever come across." It was necessary to be up and doing if a man was going to provide for a family.

Now this assertion proved to be true, for the agent of the harvester company visited him and requested payment of the notes given the year before. The agent was gracious when the inability to pay was explained. He would renew the paper if it could be secured by the land. There was no hurry about payment, but it was necessary for the details to be finished up in a business-like manner. The thing looked simple enough. It was a just debt and Mr. Farnshaw intended to pay it. He'd as soon it was secured by the land as any other way. The details were soon arranged.

Mr. Farnshaw agreed to meet the agent in Colebyville, the nearest town, the next day, and have the papers made out. After the agent was gone Mr. Farnshaw went to the house to inform his wife that she was to go to town and attach her name to the document.

The storm of protest was expected, and when Mrs. Farnshaw broke out with:

"Now, pa, you ain't never goin' t' mortgage th' farm, are you?" he answered surlily:

"Yes, I be, an' I don't want no words about it neither," and walked determinedly out of the house, leaving his wife to cry out her fears with her children.

"We won't have where to lay our heads, soon," she announced bitterly. "I've seen somethin' of th' mortgage business an' I ain't never seen any of 'em free from payin' interest afterward." This was no mere personal quarrel. Her children distinguished that. This was real, definite trouble.

Accustomed as the child was to her mother's woes, Lizzie Farnshaw was moved to unusual demonstrations by the quality of the outburst of tears which followed the words, and said impulsively:

“Never you mind, ma, I’m going to teach school in another year, and I’ll help pay the interest; and we’ll get out of debt, too, somehow.” 46

Mrs. Farnshaw brightened.

“I hadn’t thought of that!” she said. “I’m glad you’re willin’ t’ help out. I had thought maybe you’d get me one of them new nubies after you got some money of your own.” She went into the other room to lay out the black dress, which death had sanctified some months before, for use on the morrow. The opportunity to wear the emblems of mourning turned her childish mind away from the object of her journey, and left her as unconscious as the young girl herself that the mortgage had extended from the land to the lives of herself and her husband, and that in that promise it had laid its withering hand on the future of her child as well.

The promise of assistance had been lightly given; unearned money is always easily spent; besides, a teacher’s salary seemed rolling wealth to the girl who had never had a whole dollar in her life. The question of paying the next year’s interest was for the time settled. The next morning the healthy young mind was much more largely concerned with the appearance of her mother in the new black dress than with either the mourning it represented or the mortgage which occasioned its presence. She sensed dimly that a mortgage was a calamity, but her vigorous youth refused to concern itself for long with a disaster so far removed as the next year.

But though calamity might pursue Lizzie Farnshaw on one hand, true to her innate nature she handled fate in so masterful a manner that even poverty could not cheat her youth of all its prerogatives. In order to sufficiently nourish the teams which must be used in seeding, Josiah 47
Farnshaw had been obliged to use a part of his seed corn for feed. In despair at the thought of not being able to plant all the land under cultivation, he was overjoyed to hear that a farmer by the name of Hornby, who lived twenty miles or more to the south, had a new and desirable variety which he was trying to exchange for cows with young calves by their sides. A calf was selected from their diminished herd, its mother tied behind the wagon which held it, and Lizzie taken along to assist in driving. The journey, though begun in early morning, was a tedious one, for the cow fretted, the day was hot, and the footsore and weary child was worn out long before the Hornby place was reached. It was after nine o’clock when they did arrive, the last five miles having been made with the added burden of a horse which seemed not at all well. Mr. Farnshaw would not even go into the house to eat supper, but asked the farmer to see that Lizzie was put to bed at once, while he remained with the sick horse. The best team had been chosen for this trip, in spite of the near approach of foaling time for one of the mares, because the other horses were too reduced by lack of food to drive so far.

After eating a bowl of bread and milk the tired child was taken to her room by Mrs. Hornby, and in spite of the ruffled curtains which adorned the windows and the other evidences of taste and refinement about her, she was soon fast asleep.

The next morning at daybreak the household of Nathan Hornby was astir. The first object upon 48
which Lizzie’s eyes fell was Susan Hornby herself, who had come to call her to breakfast.

“Your father took one of our horses and started right off home this morning. The one that was sick last night died and left a little colt. He said he thought he had better get the other one home at once, so he took ours. Come right into our room to wash and comb.”

Lizzie was on her feet instantly and followed her hostess into the next room, making love to the neat white bows of her hostess’ apron-strings as she went. What did she care about her father’s departure without her when she could wash her face in a white bowl whose pitcher stood beside the washstand, and comb her hair before a looking-glass “where you could see your head and your belt at the same time?” But the combing was destined to be a lengthy process, for before the child had pulled her comb through the first lock attacked she saw reflected beside her face in that mirror an old-fashioned, black walnut secretary *full of books*! Lizzie Farnshaw had never seen a dozen books in one house in her life except school books, and here were rows of books that didn’t look like any she had ever seen. She took her comb and walked over to the bookcase where she could read the titles and comb at the same time, the spacious mirror, two whole feet in length, being forgotten in this much more desirable gift of fortune.

Susan Hornby’s eyes twinkled with delight. In the five years she had been in Kansas she had never been able to persuade any one to read with her. Here was a kindred spirit. She looked at 49
the fifteen-year-old girl and was anxious to know how it happened that she was interested in books at her time of life.

“Do you like to read?”

The question was repeated, and once more she asked it before the child heard her.

“I guess you do,” she laughed, answering her own question. “We’ll have some good times before your father comes back for you. Come on to breakfast now—the men are waiting.”

Lizzie Farnshaw fell naturally into her improved surroundings. The educating processes of reforming her language that year had also tended to improve the girl in other ways and it was with her straight brown hair gathered into neat braids, clean finger-nails, and a feeling of general self-respect that she approached Susan Hornby’s white-clothed table and was introduced to Mr. Hornby and the hired men who were already seated there.

“Right glad t’ see you. I been feedin’ th’ colt. It’s about as likely a specimine as you be,” was Nathan Hornby’s salutation, and his handclasp was as hearty as his stubby fingered, hairy hands could make it.

Lizzie slipped quietly into her chair at his side, and stole a glance up at him again. All through the meal he found her eyes turning toward him curiously, and at last he said good-naturedly:

“I’ll know you next time whether you do me or not.”

The remark was a random one and meant nothing at all, except that he had been conscious of her close attention, but something in the way her gaze was withdrawn showed that whatever she had been thinking she wished to conceal it, and in the end it made Nathan Hornby really uncomfortable. The fact of the matter was that Nathan’s language did not fit his surroundings. Susan Hornby’s house was in advance of the country in which they lived, while her husband fitted the pioneer life he had chosen. Of this fact neither husband nor wife seemed to be conscious. Nathan was ten years older than the woman he had married. In accepting him she had accepted him as he was; later she had grown, but to her he remained the same; he was just Nathan, and needed no analysis. They lived and loved, and radiated the harmony which was theirs. The incongruities of their union were evident to this child, who was supersensitive about grammatical constructions, but their harmony was to be one of the strong lessons of her life. Lizzie was accustomed to ungrammatical language at home, but the atmosphere of this house made ignorance of good form noticeable. She liked Mr. Hornby, but she wondered a little about his association with his wife and her home. She went with him to see the colt after breakfast and remarked upon his neat barnyard in a manner which lifted the cloud upon his face; he had had a feeling that he did not somehow come up to her expectations. 50

The little colt nosed about his hand looking for food, and Nathan laughed.

“It’s just like th’ human critter o’ that age—wants t’ try everything in its mouth,” he said, trying to find a topic of conversation. 51

Again Nathan Hornby caught a flicker of surprise in Lizzie Farnshaw’s eye, and again he was disconcerted.

“Wonder what I done t’ set that child t’ lookin’ at me so funny?” he asked himself as he went to the field later, and being big-hearted and ignorant was unaware that a man could hamstring himself by an ungrammatical phrase.

All day Susan Hornby read with the young girl and questioned her to get into touch with her life and thought, and when night came was wildly enthusiastic about her.

“Nate, she’s worth a lift,” she said to her husband after Lizzie had again been tucked into bed. “Let’s take her with us to Topeka this fall and put her into the high school. She’s—she’s just the age our Katie would have been. She says some teacher told her she was ready for the high school.”

“Better wait till I’m elected, Sue,” Nathan replied, and then, seeing Susan’s face cloud over with disappointment, added more cheerfully:

“Of course I don’t care if you have the child, but you mustn’t get to countin’ on this thing. That’s th’ trouble with these here fool politics: they get folks t’ countin’ on things that can’t come around.”

Long after his wife was asleep, however, he mused upon the prospects of going to Topeka, and for her sake he wanted to go. Nathan Hornby always spoke of his chances of being elected to the legislature of his state deprecatingly. He swaggered and pretended to be indifferent, but the worm of desire burrowed deeper every time Topeka was mentioned. The very fact that he was uneducated, and, as the Democrats had said, unfit, made him desire it the more. Criticism had aroused the spirit of contest in him. Also he wanted Susan, now that she had begun to plan for it, to have it. Nathan Hornby knew that the woman he had married was his superior, and loved her for it. Masculine jealousy he did not know. He would have been sincerely glad to have had her elected to the legislature of Kansas instead of himself. 52

“It’s like Sue t’ want t’ take th’ girl,” he meditated, the next day in the cornfield. “She’ll see Katie in every girl she sees for th’ rest of ’er days, I reckon. I wouldn’t ’a’ had no show at Topeka, nohow, if she hadn’t ’a’ made Wallace feel good ’bout that crazy thing he calls ’is wife. Curious how big things hinge on little ones. Now Sue had no more idea o’ gettin’ a nomination t’ th’ legislature for me than that hen she was foolin’ with this mornin’.” Later, he remembered the thing that had worried him before the subject of Topeka came up. “Wonder what I done that set that youngster t’ lookin’ at me so funny?”

Mrs. Hornby had not set her heart on going to Topeka foolishly, but she wanted to go and it entered into all her plans. She did not tell the young girl of her plans at once, but waited for her to make her place in Nathan’s heart, as she was sure she would do. On that point the girl succeeded surprisingly. Her knowledge of horses, of harness, of farm subjects in general made good soil for conversation with her host, and her love for the motherless colt called her to the barn and made special openings for communications. Nathan called the colt, which was of the feminine gender, Pat, because its upper lip was so long, and that too the girl enjoyed, and entered into the joke by softening the name to Patsie. They were good friends. Having decided to befriend her, the man’s interest in her increased. She was to be theirs. The sense of possession grew with both husband and wife. Already they had cast their lot with the child, and when at last they put the question of the high school to her, the friendship was firmly welded by the extravagance of its reception. 53

“Think of it! Think of it! Only think of it! I didn’t know how it was going to come about, but I was sure I was going to get it somehow!” the young girl cried, dancing about the room excitedly. “Whenever I was afraid something was going to keep me from it, I used to say, ‘I will! I will! I

will go to high school!' Oh, isn't it too lovely! Do you think my saying it made any difference?" she asked eagerly; and the quaint couple, who were born two generations in advance of the birth cry of New Thought, laughed innocently and made no reply.

When the floodgates of surprise and emotion were opened, and she began to talk of her hopes and fears, it was but natural that she should speak of her struggles for personal improvement, though this was instinctively done when Mr. Hornby was absent.

Curiously enough, some of her points of information were as helpful to Susan Hornby as they had been to her. Mrs. Hornby knew the rules of good grammar, but many little observances of 54
table manners had changed since her youth. She read and was well informed on general topics of the day, but her life for more than fifteen years had been spent with Nathan and with the hired men who ate at her table, and she had become careless of small things, so that she listened with an amused smile, but with real profit as well, to Lizzie's confidences that "You shouldn't cross your knife and fork on your plate when you are through eating, like the hired men, but lay them side by side, neat and straight"; that "You shouldn't eat with your knife, neither," and that "To sip your coffee out of your saucer with a noise like grasshoppers' wings was just awful!" She, too, was brushing up to go to Topeka, and while much in advance of her husband or any of her associates in society matters, she had lived the life of the farm, and to the end of her existence would be conscious of the inequalities of her education. Of this she said nothing to the child, but listened and remembered. Occasionally she reminded the girl that they might not go to Topeka, but even as she warned she was quickening the subconscious mind to aid in recording any fact which might be advantageous when she herself got there, and her love for the child grew. The girl was part of the scheme. In a week she had become one of the family.

At the end of the week Mr. Farnshaw did not appear; farm matters had detained him, so that the opportunity for a closer acquaintance with his daughter was permitted. Under Mrs. Hornby the child blossomed naturally. The old-fashioned secretary was the young girl's delight. Seeing her 55
shaking in silent glee over "David Copperfield" one night, and remembering her eager pursuit of intellectual things, Mrs. Hornby remarked to her husband, "As a man thinketh in his heart, so is he." The world of to-day would add to Susan Hornby's little speech, "Not only as a man thinketh in his heart, so is he," but "So shall he live, and do, and be surrounded." This simple daughter of the farm, the herds, and the homesteaded hills of bleak and barren Kansas, where the educated and intellectual of earth were as much foreigners as the inhabitants of far off Russia or Hindustan, had by her thought not only prepared herself for the life she coveted, but had compelled the opportunity to enter upon her travels therein. When Mr. Farnshaw arrived, Mrs. Hornby was fortunate in the form of her request to take his daughter with her, and it was arranged that if they went to Topeka the child should be a member of their household.

"We'll be just as good to her as if she were our own," she promised, and then added reflectively, "We're going to call her her full name too. Elizabeth was my mother's name. It's so much prettier than Lizzie."

Under any other circumstances Mr. Farnshaw would have seen symptoms of being "stuck-up" in the change of name, but Elizabeth had been his mother's name, and although he had little recollection of his mother, and had never heard her called by her given name, he had seen it writ large on her tombstone, and, his eye having become accustomed to the word, his ear fell naturally into line with its pronunciation; besides, his daughter was to be a school-teacher, and 56
was to sign contracts like a man, and must have a proper sort of name. She was to live in the house of a member of the legislature, too, and already called him and his wife "Uncle" and "Aunt." Mr. Farnshaw tasted pride and found it a sweet morsel.

Election day came the first week in November and Nathan was successful. With the high school year in view, they moved to Topeka the next week. It was as if they were literally to educate their Katie. A slight disappointment awaited them. Though they were ready the young girl did not come immediately.

According to the dilatory methods of the Farnshaw household, Elizabeth—she had been supported by her father when the boys had shown an inclination to laugh her out of the change of name—was three weeks later yet in going. The eager girl urged at home that she would be behind her classes if she went into school so late in the term, but her parents, who knew nothing of school requirements, refused to let her go till the corn was all husked and everything snug for the winter, arguing that so much stock had been lost the winter before that every care must be taken of what was left. Tears at the prospect of such a handicap made no impression, and it was not till December that the child and her father set off in the farm wagon for Topeka, two days distant. Railroad fare was not to be considered, and two new dresses and a new pair of shoes—not side-laces—were all the additions to her wardrobe. 57

Susan Hornby was much annoyed at the delay, but met the young girl with open arms when she arrived.

She was less happy in accosting Mr. Farnshaw.

"Why in this world did you keep her so late? Half the year is gone!" was her luckless remark to him.

"She's doin' mighty well t' get t' come at all," Mr. Farnshaw replied, taking instant offence. "I'm th' only man in our part of th' country that's givin' 'is childern any show at th' high school at all, I can tell you. I knew I wouldn't get no thanks for it from th' beginnin'. That's th' way with things nowadays," was his reply.

"Oh, well, we all know you have needed her, and that it's hard to spare a child on the farm, but

we were so anxious to have her have all that could be got out of this year," Mrs. Hornby said, divided between a desire to scold the man and a real disinclination to hurt any one. So much valuable time had been lost. She saw that she must be politic for Elizabeth's sake, however, for the child's appearance told the experienced woman that she must keep him in a good humour and inveigle him into giving her a little money for clothes.

"We'll just make the best of the time that is left, little girl," Mrs. Hornby said cheerfully, and in that only added to the impression already made, for Mr. Farnshaw remembered his daughter's tears, and the feeling grew that instead of being lauded for what he considered a great sacrifice on his part, he was coming in for a blame wholly unexpected, and that this woman was siding with the girl and going to spoil her. People of the farm, more than any other class, resent being 58
blamed, and Josiah Farnshaw was an extreme representative of his class. He had come to Topeka delighted with himself because of the fine opportunities he was giving his daughter, and here was this woman at the first word finding fault because he had not done better; it was no wonder that children were not satisfied with anything a man could give them!

There was now no possibility of Elizabeth entering school till after Christmas, and Aunt Susan turned her attention to efforts to get the most out of the time they would have to reorganize the poorly constructed dresses. She was considerate of Mr. Farnshaw's evident sensitiveness, seeing also that he had no real comprehension of the damage done by the delay, and made him comfortable by urging him to stay on after he was really ready to go home. So successful was she that he forgot for the time he was in her presence that all was not in his favour, and she was able to induce him to give all that he was able to give toward the improvements she suggested in his daughter's wearing apparel. Elizabeth was surprised at the ready response to demands made upon his purse, but here again Mrs. Hornby left a sting, wholly unintended and at the time not recognized by Mr. Farnshaw himself, but remembered by him later and never forgotten after it was once fixed firmly in his mind. Aunt Susan, concerned for the entrance of the child into the company of those of her own age, pointed out to her father the gayly dressed girls of Elizabeth's age, and suggested that a new coat would be an absolute necessity. Mr. Farnshaw had given Mrs. Hornby all the money he had with him except four dollars, and his wife had 59
given him a list of groceries to be purchased in the city. It rather pleased him to use the money toward his daughter's adornment and it tickled his pride as well to give his last cent toward her education. Mrs. Hornby looked at the money he placed in her hand, and hesitated visibly. Josiah Farnshaw stiffened at her manner. Aunt Susan hated to ask for more, but this would not buy the girl a coat that she could wear in Topeka!

"You are just as good as you can be about this, Mr. Farnshaw, but—but a coat like the other girls have will cost at least eight or ten dollars." She felt his attitude.

The amount named took the man's breath. He had given all he had and yet this woman, whom he had begun to like again, was not satisfied!

"A man can't do no more'n he can, an' that's th' last red cent I've got," he replied, humiliated at the necessity of the confession.

"Oh! I'm so sorry," Aunt Susan exclaimed, really so at having forced the statement. She sat with her brows knit in serious thought a moment, and a light began to break in upon her. Elizabeth had to have that wrap somehow and here was a way right before her. She remembered a long cape she had noticed going down the street that very morning.

"I guess we can make it do," she said hesitantly. She was thinking out her plan and spoke slowly. "We'll just make a cloak ourselves. We can do it." 60

Josiah Farnshaw left the next day for home, in a good humour with himself and his munificence, but on the way home remembered Susan Hornby's hesitancy and later decision to make the cloak herself, and the worm of suspicion began to gnaw again.

"If that woman could make something that'd do, what'd she ask for one of them expensive coats for?" he asked himself. "I guess it's only th' girl that figures in that deal! I ain't nothin' but th' oats she feeds on nohow," he reflected, and having once given the thought lodgment it grew and became the chief stone of the corner.

Our own comes to us, and Josiah Farnshaw had formed the habit of that kind of thinking. He felt that he was being robbed, and forgot that his daughter was being befriended, and out of his trip to Topeka got only a sour distaste for the woman he could clearly see was going to encourage the child in extravagance. He had never spent so much money on the entire family in a winter as he had done on that girl, and yet it wasn't enough. "He'd bet he'd never give 'er another year's schoolin'. She'd come home an' get a summer school—that's what she'd do. All folks thought about nowadays was clothes!"

To Elizabeth Farnshaw every day of that busy month was full of unconscious growth. As soon as Mr. Farnshaw was out of sight, Mrs. Hornby said to Elizabeth:

"Now, my child, I am going to take up the seams in that basque."

Elizabeth looked down at her "long basque" in dismay; she had striven hard over that waist and had thought that it would do very well, though conscious that it had faults. Her face flushed as 61
she answered reluctantly:

"The seam in the back isn't quite straight, but—I never made one like it before—and I thought it would do."

"So it would, dear, but it can do better and we've got plenty of time to fix it. You'll feel ever so

much better about it when you see how the other girls are dressed."

As Aunt Susan snipped and ripped and rebasted the refractory seam, Elizabeth brought out her little stores of finery to discuss their artistic features.

"Look," she said, opening a pasteboard box which held her few ribbons. "I coaxed a long time for that, but I got it." She held up for Aunt Susan's approval a new Alsatian bow of pink ribbon. "I wanted the wide, but they didn't have it, so I got a lot of the narrow and hid the joinings in the pleats. I think it's pretty, don't you?"

Susan Hornby looked at the bow critically, and then seeing Elizabeth's face cloud over with a suspicion that she did not regard the treasure with favour, said slowly:

"It's pretty—that is, it's a pretty colour; but I was looking to see about how many yards there was in it, for the girls aren't wearing Alsatian bows, as you call them, this year. They seem to be wearing their hair mostly in two plain braids. I'm glad of it, for you look ever so much better with your hair done that way. We can rip it up and press the ribbon. I'm awfully glad you've got such a lot; It'll make lovely bows for the braids." 62

While Elizabeth ripped her bow to pieces Aunt Susan's tongue ran on with the subject nearest her heart.

"To-morrow morning I'm going to have you sit by that window and watch the girls that go past about school time. You'll learn more this month doing that than you would in school, I expect. It's just as well you can't start till next term, since you didn't get here at first."

"Next term!" her new dresses with their long basques—long basques were more talked of than any other feature of dress that year, not by Elizabeth alone but all womankind—had seemed so magnificent that she could not think of it being necessary to take a whole month to make them over.

"Yes, not till after Christmas. You can't start in at the middle of a term in high school like you can in the country. We'll get you a wrap made before that time. I told your father I couldn't think of your going without a coat of some sort. He didn't feel that he could afford a coat, so I'm going to get the cloth and you and I will make you a circular this week."

"A circular? What's that?"

Aunt Susan explained the new kind of cape which came down to the bottom of the dress and had a hood lined with bright coloured silk and was puckered with rubber to make it fit the face.

It took all day to finish the basque, and the next morning Elizabeth watched the well-dressed city girls loiter past, and was glad that she could have a month to get ready to meet them in the schoolroom. She had never known anybody dressed so well for anything but a funeral, or a 63 party, or to go to church. They actually wore gloves to school! Elizabeth looked at her brown hands and decided that she would wear her mittens to bed till her hands sweated themselves to a proper degree of whiteness, and Susan Hornby let her look on, and weigh, and exclaim. Thus was Elizabeth Farnshaw's education begun.

The afternoon was spent selecting the goods for the new cape, and wandering about the great stores and the streets; a new pair of pretty gray gloves were obtained, and for the first time Elizabeth heard the term "lisle thread" used as against the common term of cotton for all things not silk or woollen. The new cape was to have a wonderful metal fastener called a clasp, and life ran like a silver stream the next two days as they sewed on the new-fangled garment.

Oh, father! could you have but seen truly, how great would have been your joy!

Each day Elizabeth watched the boys and girls come and go past Nathan Hornby's house, and when the cape was finished she and Aunt Susan went daily on shopping expeditions. It was the most wonderful week of her fifteen years, and was well rounded out by going to church on Sunday and for the first time listening to a choir, and seeing a window of softly coloured glass. She almost wondered if she had been transported from the body to the heaven of crowns and harps which her mother loved to describe.

To heaven Elizabeth Farnshaw had gone in very truth, but it was the heaven of adolescence and 64 developing womanhood. In the short time she had been observing the comings and goings of the boys and girls of their neighbourhood one young man had begun to stand out from the rest. Elizabeth was nearly sixteen, and when she saw *him* now in a pew a few seats ahead of her she made a little movement of astonishment.

Aunt Susan caught the sound of the indrawn breath and looked around inquiringly, but Elizabeth, with eyes modestly down, studied her gray-gloved hands and seemed unaware of her scrutiny. Happiness had been Elizabeth Farnshaw's daily portion for weeks, but this was different. Here was happiness of another sort, with other qualities, composed of more compelling elements. The gamut of bliss had not all been run. Elizabeth had progressed from Arcadia to Paradise and was invoicing her emotions. She never shied around a subject, but looked all things in the face; and she found this delightfully surprising world of emotions as entrancing as the external one of mellow light, music, good clothes, and educational prospects. The rest of the hour was a blissful dream, in which the only thought was a wish for Luther and his stunted pony and the freedom of grassy slopes where she could pour out her newfound joy. With each new event of this life the loss of Luther was accentuated.

Nathan Hornby and his wife had no acquaintances in Topeka. They left the church as soon as the service was over. The young girl went with them, conscious that *he* was behind her, glad

that her new cape was finished, wondering if *he* noticed it, eager to be seen yet wanting to hide, and foolishly aglow and wishing devoutly that she had eyes in the back of her head. Henceforth Elizabeth lived in the thought of seeing *him*. She dubbed him “The Unknown,” and if she looked out of the window at home, it was in the hope of seeing him pass; on the way to school she was alert and watchful for a glimpse of him in the distance; if she went to church it was to look for him as soon as seated, though he was rarely there. If she saw him in the morning her day was made glad; if she failed to see him she looked forward with anticipation to the next day.

The winter spent itself. January passed, and February. The glad days ran on in kaleidoscopic readjustment of joy, work, wonder, and unfoldment, as far as Elizabeth’s own life was concerned. After the manner of youth, her own affairs absorbed her. In fact the young girl was so filled with the delights of her own little world that it was only gradually that she began to understand that the life in Topeka was not as fortunate with the dear couple who had shared with her their home. The first signs of trouble were made manifest to her by the increasing tenderness with which Susan Hornby hovered around her mate, and her evident and growing solicitude.

Elizabeth was startled when she did at last comprehend the gloom and anxiety about her. The manner of the pair prevented questions, but, as she watched covertly, Aunt Susan’s distress was transferred to her. Elizabeth was not curious, but she was intensely sympathetic, and from 66
disinterested motives she became keenly observant of all that took place about her. No opportunity to help offered. With a sharp realization that her best friends were in trouble, she was obliged to conceal any trace of that knowledge. Nathan and his wife talked apart and in low tones, avoiding the young girl’s presence, and were evidently puzzled and uneasy. It was Elizabeth’s way to make the troubles of those about her her own. Longing to help, it was impossible to be indifferent. Gradually she got bits of indirect light upon the subject. From little things dropped accidentally, and often from explanations which circumstances forced upon them, Elizabeth learned that money was scarce. This came as a shock, and with all the hurt and heartsick worry which the mention of finances always brought to the girl. Why must people have money? she asked herself daily. And mixed with dreams of “The Unknown” came speculations as to the part which money played in the game of life, and the bondage of men to it, and a longing to be free from its withering grasp. In her childish mind the matter of freedom became slightly mixed and she dreamed dreams of being free by owning unlimited amounts of it, and she coveted marvellous bank accounts, acquired in some mystical way, with which the woes of humanity could be relieved by giving. Along with this new idea of dispensing charity grew a desire to know why the crop of cash was short in Nathan Hornby’s home. In her innocent way she led up to the subject of expenses in general, but Aunt Susan kept family affairs strictly in the family and vouchsafed no explanations, unaware that the example she set in that way was to 67
bear strange and unexpected fruit. But though Elizabeth carried the reflex of the anxiety of those about her, she was scarcely sixteen, and youth and joy and life claimed her attention and the affairs of her stage in life’s span crowded out the affairs of others.

These were days of transition. The child was becoming a woman. The love which was flowing out of her heart like a spring freshet toward one who, because she saw him less often was the more often in her thoughts, was making Elizabeth Farnshaw more observant of those who professed love. Desiring mutual relations, she became sensitive to the communications of those about her who had to do with mutual relations.

Elizabeth saw that the more trouble clouded the brow of Nathan Hornby the cheerier and closer Aunt Susan drew to him. There was none of the quarrels here to which Elizabeth had become accustomed when things went wrong at home. The contrast between her father’s and mother’s daily life and that of Nathan and Susan Hornby in times of trouble was the subject of constant thought. Nathan and Susan Hornby were to be guide-posts along the highway of Elizabeth Farnshaw’s domestic affairs. Love pointed her thoughts toward marriage, and here was a worthy model after which to build. Her natural affection and gratitude were enhanced by the fact that this couple with whom she lived, and who were otherwise very dear to her, were the immediate example of all that was noble in the world of her present dreams. 68

The fact that the harmony between Aunt Susan and her mate was of stern stuff and not matured solely upon success and pleasure added to the strength of that example. Elizabeth had not been taken into the confidence of either; their private affairs were kept screened from the gaze of any but themselves. By a word dropped here and there, however, she learned that Nathan had speculated and lost much money; also that he had favoured measures advanced by butter-tongued lobbyists, and that he had lost the good-will of many of his constituents.

While Elizabeth watched the tender association of Nathan Hornby and his wife and found such glowing tribute in her heart toward the life they lived together, a tragedy, in spite of the support and affection lavished by a faithful wife, was to leave the sunny, cordial man a broken, half-suspicious one.

Nathan Hornby was to learn that legislative assemblies were death-traps to those whom providence had failed to coach in diplomacy and judgment, that legislation was a game at which none but gamesters might successfully play, a devouring flame singeing the wings of all who failed to distinguish between the light of a common candle and that of a real sun, that it was a nightmare to most, and ticklish business for all. Unable to distinguish between the good and the bad intentions of those who advocated the passage of bills, convinced long before the end of the legislative session that a bill looking innocent and direct in its wording might be evil and indirect in its outworking, Nathan became more and more confused and less and less able to 69
withstand the attacks made upon him.

Nathan Hornby was a leaden figure in the legislative assembly. He was honest, but slow of wit, and apt to become passive if pushed beyond his power to understand. This man who could throw the earth up to a hill of corn with skill and precision, who could build a haystack which would turn the rains and snows of winter, and break a colt to the harness without breaking its spirit, who had handled successfully the problems to which he had been trained, was not able to throw arguments up to the legislative hill or protect his reputation against the floods of criticism and accusation to which his actions were subjected either here in the Capitol or at home among his constituents. His spirit was broken: he recognized that he was totally unfit for the position into which fortune had thrust him. Nathan sat back in his chair, in the House, with few books and papers on the desk before him, and these unopened, his manner, like his wrinkled boots, indicative of the farm, his whole attitude that of the unsophisticated. He listened to the speeches made around him, but had no ideas to express. He was a pathetic figure. Only the accidents of Grasshopper Year, when legislative timber was scarce, could have placed him in such a position. His tough, shaven cheeks grew thinner day by day as he pulled at the brush of grizzled chin-whiskers and tried to understand what went on before him.

During those days Susan was both his refuge and the cross of his crucifixion. The deeper his difficulties became the more he turned to her for help, certain not only that she understood 70
better than he the measures about which his colleagues argued, but that she understood him and his failures, as well as his needs. It was because Susan understood that the cross was so heavy. If his wife had been a dull woman, if she had been a woman without ambitions of her own, if she could have been hoaxed into thinking him the equal of his associates, it would have been easier; but Nathan was aware that Susan Hornby knew to the finest detail the nature of his failure as well as she understood and loved the best in him. During those gloomy days the man marvelled at the gentleness of her solicitations for his cheering and encouragement, not realizing that woman is by nature faithful where man is appreciative of her devotion. Appreciation! that had been the keynote of Nathan Hornby’s attitude toward his wife. Susan had always known what she ought to do, what she wanted to do, and what it was best for her to do, and in all matters where her individual affairs were concerned Nathan had never interposed coercion nor advice. If Susan made mistakes, her husband knew that they were the mistakes of the head and not of the heart, and left her to correct them in her own way.

Susan Hornby had always been free, and now the walls of love and trust which Nathan Hornby had builded about their home for nearly twenty years were to be a flawless rampart behind which he could take refuge from foes without and receive help from within. At Nathan’s request his wife came day after day and listened to the discussions toward the end of the session. 71
Nathan sat before her dumb, but she was the anchor to his drifting soul as the political landslide took the ground out from under his feet.

“I only wisht I’d ’a’ taken you in on this thing sooner,” he said on one occasion, and remembered those first weeks when he had felt self-sufficient, and had made false moves at the State House, and had also let himself be inveigled into buying “a few margins.” That was the bitterest drop in his cup. Wheat had dropped steadily from the very day he had begun buying. A steady decline in prices was unthinkable, and it was not till their land was endangered that the trusting man began to take alarm, and even then he let the speculators who profited by the sales induce him to make one more wild investment to save that which he had already lost.

His certainty that his neighbors would take revenge upon *him* for political differences by sly prods regarding speculation was of slight importance, but Susan was to be humiliated before them!—Susan, who had tried to help him to see the dangers—Susan, who did not complain when she was called upon to sign the deeds to the land she had helped to win from the Indians and the wilderness of uncultivated things. Nathan remembered on that bitter day that but for her adventurous spirit he would have been working at day’s wages in old Indiana, instead of having a home and being an active member of his community and a member of the legislature of his state, with opportunities to prove himself a man in the world of men. He had failed, and his 72
failure reacted upon her. It was not the loss of money and political prestige alone which bit. Another phase of their life in Topeka added its humiliation. Nathan had wanted his wife to share his political honours and had found himself ignorant of every means by which these things could be brought to her. He had heard of gay winters at the Capital, but they lived apart from it all. The house in which he had placed her was attractive and on a good street, but the men whom he met at the State House soon saw that nothing was to be gained through knowing Nathan Hornby, and failed to ask their wives to call upon his wife.

Disaster is in exact ratio to our valuation of things. Although Nathan Hornby had lost three fourths of his land, his reputation as a business man and politician, and his faith in men, he still had left the one essential gift which should have helped him to win again all that which he had lost. Susan Hornby, like Ruth of old, abandoned all else and abode with her husband in love, cheering him at each problematical step, and saying as they returned from the notary’s office after signing away their land to a stranger:

“Never mind, Nate, there are only two of us,” and for the first time since their little daughter had been taken from them, he had replied:

“Yes, only two, thank God!” and had kissed awkwardly the hand laid over his mouth, and Susan had seen the glitter of a tear on his faded lashes, the first in many years.

Susan knew that Nathan would never forget the failures of that year, but she also knew that the comfort of accustomed activities would help to fill his mind and keep his thoughts from sore 73
introspection. Here in Topeka there was nothing to do but cogitate and reflect. It was therefore

a relief to her when Elizabeth received a letter from her mother summoning her home to teach a spring term of school. While at any other time she would have been filled with indignation at the recall of Elizabeth just as she was beginning to get settled to her new work, Susan Hornby felt that Elizabeth needed education less at this point than Nathan needed the busy seeding season to occupy his troubled thoughts.

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CHAPTER III

REFORMS NOT EASY TO DISCUSS

Elizabeth kept her tears and regrets to herself. She cried them out on her pillow that night, all the disappointments and handicaps of that wonderful year of experience and aspiration, but as she cried she planned the arrangements of her going.

The letter was received on Thursday night; Elizabeth decided that she would go for her books the next day, and say her farewells to desk, recitation room, and the halls that had been dear to her. When Elizabeth was called to the blackboard that afternoon to explain a problem in algebra, the board, the pointer, the very chalk in her fingers cried aloud their unity with her life and thought, and she sat down when it was over with a great throbbing in her throat and ears, and a sense of overwhelming disaster.

As Elizabeth carried her books home under her arm, bulging out one side of her circular like an unevenly inflated pudding-bag, the throbbing continued, and she turned into the less frequented streets with the certainty that she was going to disgrace herself with tears shed publicly. It had been a trying day, and in spite of all efforts her emotions broke loose before she could gain the 75
shelter of home. Hurrying blindly to get the last block covered, she nearly dropped her books as she turned the corner.

“The Unknown” was coming toward her!

Her startled glance of recognition was so unexpectedly open that he thought that he had probably met her. He looked puzzled, but lifted his hat as she hurried past him, wiping the tears from her face with her free hand.

A boy called from across the street an instant later.

“Oh, Hugh, I’m coming over for some help on that chem. ex. to-night.”

“All right,” came the answer from “The Unknown,” and mixed with Elizabeth’s mortifying confusion was a quick thrill at knowing his name.

“Hugh!”

No opportunity had ever come to meet him or to find out what his name might be. Elizabeth was conscious that her life on the farm had made of her an impossible mate for this young man who, even among the young men of the city, was set apart by a peculiar grace and culture. She remembered the hat which had not merely been lifted from the head, but had been carried below the chin as he bowed distantly, and also the well-bred curiosity of his look. The rest of the leave-taking was made easier by having met him, and received his bow, and acquired the glorious, mystical knowledge of his name.

To round out the experiences of the winter, fate decreed that Mr. Farnshaw could not come for her, and the glitter of the inside of a railway coach, with its brass lamps, plush seats, and 76
polished woods, was added to her experimental knowledge. Luther was somehow connected in her mind with the day’s experiences and she wished devoutly that she could talk to him about the disappointment of leaving her school before the end of the term, and of this journey home on the train, and of Hugh. Yes, Elizabeth would have told Luther even of Hugh. Luther Hansen was to Elizabeth Farnshaw unchanged and unchangeable. The transformations of her own life did not call for any such transformations in him. He was Luther. It had been his mental processes which had won and now sustained her attachment for him. Their two minds had worked together as one mind while they had struggled with the innocent problems of their childhood days, and Elizabeth still felt incomplete without him. She had been less conscious of Luther’s absence the first year than at any time since his going away, but in Topeka, and now that she was approaching the scene of their association together, Elizabeth wanted him with a depth of homesickness she had never felt before. It was hard to go back to the old battleground and not find him there. The prospects in store for her at home made her shrink. Elizabeth fell to wondering if any improvement in that home were possible. She had had them quite cheerfully in mind all winter, but now that the distance between her home and herself lessened rapidly a feeling of inadequacy came upon her, and the glitter of the wonderful coach in which she was riding was forgotten. Could she help? The only thing that was very clear to her was that much patience would be necessary. At Uncle Nathan’s they had been gentle and loving and tolerant. 77

“Can I make them see it—and see how?” she asked herself so many times that the wheels beneath her took up the refrain.

“Gentle and loving and tolerant—gentle and loving and tolerant—gentle and loving and tolerant,” they sang for miles as she sat with her young brow puckered into a deep frown.

The realities of life were thrust into the foreground the moment Elizabeth arrived, and for new reasons she missed Luther. Mr. Farnshaw resented the new circular.

“Is that th’ damned fool kind of coat she was talkin’ about?” he inquired as his daughter alighted from the farm wagon at the kitchen door that afternoon. “It ain’t got no warmth,” he added scornfully. “Th’ ain’ nothin’ to it but looks, an’ not much of that. What ’d y’ you do with th’ coat you had?”

The old heartsickening contention had begun.

“I’ve got it.”

“Well, you see that you wear it and don’t go makin’ a fool out of yourself around here. I’d ’a’ kept my money if I’d ’a’ knowed it was goin’ t’ be put into a thing that’d swell up in th’ wind like a balloon.”

Mrs. Farnshaw saw the look that swept over Elizabeth’s face and instinctively ranged herself on the side of the young girl. She saw with a woman’s eyes the style in the garment and its importance in her daughter’s appearance. When Elizabeth took it off her mother took it to the 78
bedroom to put it away, remarking in a whisper that it made her look quite like a school-teacher ought to look. She was secretly glad that her daughter had it, since it was already paid for and she did not have to make it. It would be the most observed wrap in the schoolhouse the next Sunday if she could only persuade Elizabeth to go to meeting. The metal clasp had virtues all its own.

“I think it’s ever so much more stuck-up than if it had buttons,” she whispered.

The undertone rasped on Elizabeth’s nerves. Aunt Susan never differed with Uncle Nate in undertones.

“Let’s get supper, ma,” she said, to shake herself from threatened despondency.

But though Elizabeth bustled energetically about the getting of that meal, the eating of it was not a very great success. Mr. Farnshaw discoursed upon the senselessness of prevailing styles, with the new cape plainly in mind, and Mrs. Farnshaw nudged her daughter’s knee under the table whenever Elizabeth seemed inclined to defensive retorts.

When Mr. Farnshaw had taken the milk pails on his arm and repaired to the corral, however, Mrs. Farnshaw turned from a belated churning and administered the caution in words:

“Don’t ever say anything back to your pa, Lizzie; he gets worse and worse all th’ time.”

Elizabeth considered the subject for some minutes. The wear and tear of the discords of her mother’s life she knew were far more responsible for her mother’s broken health than anything 79
she did in the way of hard work. It seemed a good time to begin the reforms upon which her heart was set.

“Ma, I’ve been thinking about you a good deal this winter,” she began slowly. “Something is wrong with us all.” The girl thought again for a moment. Her mother watched her with sharp attention and waited. Reforms were not easy to discuss with her mother; they were very different, Elizabeth and her mother. Elizabeth hardly dared express her longing to reorganize their home. If only she could effect a reformation! Her heart had been set on it all winter. She knew now how people *could* live if only they understood how to do it. Her help here was needed. When she began to speak again it was very slowly, and with a careful consideration of the words she was using.

“We ought all of us to be different. We go along day after day hating our work, scolding and fretting at each other, and never really happy, any of us, and I’ve been wondering why?”

Her mother eyed her closely. Something of the girl’s mood stirred a responsive chord.

“I’ve thought of it too,” she said, “but I can’t never tell why it is though, unless”—she spoke slowly and Elizabeth was encouraged—“unless it’s because we don’t never belong to ourselves. Now your pa wants t’ run th’ house, an’ th’ farm, an’ you children, an’ me, an’ everything, an’ I’m so tired, an’ never have any help, that anybody’d be cross. Nobody ever pities me, though. 80
Here, take this dasher an’ finish this here churnin’ for me.”

Elizabeth took the dasher into her own hand and stood looking down meditatively at the cream gathered about the hole in the churn lid. The first sentence of her mother’s remark struck her attention.

“Why can’t folks belong to themselves?” she asked, letting the dasher rest while she churned mental problems of greater moment.

Mrs. Farnshaw looked up quickly. “Well, if you think you can marry an’ belong t’ yourself, just you try it,” she replied.

“But, ma, if a man loved a woman couldn’t she get him to leave her free? Now—”

Mrs. Farnshaw cut her short. “Love! Men don’t know how to spell th’ word. They get a woman, an’ after she’s got children they know she can’t help herself. She’s got t’ stick to it ’cause she can’t raise ’em alone an’—an’ it don’t make no difference whether he takes care of ’em or not—” Words failed the exasperated woman.

Elizabeth studied her mother with a new interest. She began to apply her mother’s words to her

own case. She knew that her mother had wanted her services this spring as much as her father, and remembered the letter calling her home.

“But that don’t cover your case, ma. You love pa more than you do us children; you know you do, and we know that you do too.”

Mrs. Farnshaw usually denied the most obvious thing if her protective instincts prompted her to do so, but her daughter had hit the bull’s-eye so exactly that for the moment she had no defence ready. Elizabeth was encouraged by her mother’s silence. Mrs. Farnshaw talked so much that it was not easy to get her attention. The young girl, glowing with the discoveries made in Aunt Susan’s home, desired to get at the bottom of the causes of inharmony in her own and to reorganize it on a better basis. It looked as if she was to be granted a hearing upon her schemes.

“I don’t care about him running over *us* so much,” she said diplomatically, “but you let him run over you in the same way. Now isn’t there some way to come at him and get him to see it. When we’re alone you talk about him domineering over you, but when he’s here you let him say anything he wants to and you never try to help yourself. Why don’t you strike out on a new tack and say you won’t do it when he makes unreasonable demands? Why don’t you reason with him good-naturedly, if you think that’s better, without crying, I mean, and then if he won’t listen at all——”

“I don’t know, Lizzie,” the mother interposed slowly. “I sometimes think I will an’ then when he’s here something won’t let me. It ain’t what he says to you; it’s—it’s—something he does to you when he looks at you. I’m as weak as water when he looks at me. I don’t know why. I guess it’s because I’ve always give up—an’—an’—I can’t tell why. A woman does just like a horse—there’s more’n one kind of whippin’ a man can give—an’ she gets scared—an’ minds. A man begins right from th’ first t’ tell her what to do an’ she loves ’im and wants t’ please ’im, an’ before long she don’t have her way no more’n a nigger.”

Some of the truth of the statement came within the grasp of the daughter, who was looking across the idle churn with her mind fixed in singleness of purpose upon remedies, and yet she felt that there was some other element in the matter not yet accounted for. The hopeless tone of the older woman, however, goaded her young spirit into forgetting the caution necessary to dealing with the subject. Her blood fired with resentment that one life should be so crushed by another. It was her mother whose shoulders drooped with a burden too heavy for her to throw off.

“If you’re sure of that, why don’t you leave him? We children are old enough to support ourselves and——”

“Lizzie!”

Elizabeth had overshot the mark. Her mother was of another generation.

“But, ma,” the girl protested quickly, “I don’t say leave him if you can find any way of settling matters. Can’t you have a talk with him—and get him to let you alone if you are willing to do the very best you can? That’s the best way. Have you tried it?”

“No I hain’t,” the mother replied shortly; “it wouldn’t do no good. But if my talkin’ t’ you is goin’ t’ make you say such things, I ain’t goin’t’ talk t’ you no more. When folks is married they’re married, an’ I don’t believe in partin’, nor talk of partin’.”

“Well, I think maybe you are right, but if you and pa are going to live together you ought to try and have it out, and be a help to each other instead——” She broke off and thought a moment, “Now Aunt Susan and Uncle Nate——”

“Stop right there!” Mrs. Farnshaw cried, afire with jealousy. “That woman’s brought more trouble into this house a’ready than She’ll ever take out. Your pa’s been rantin’ about her all winter an’—an’ he said you’d be pokin’ her ways into our faces th’ very day you got home. I ’spect she’s th’ one that got it into your head to talk of partin’, most likely.”

“Oh, now, ma, don’t go on like that. You don’t know about Aunt Susan. She’s the last person in the world to ever suggest such a thing. That’s just what I started out to say—they never have a word about anything. It’s the loveliest home to live in, and I was just thinking that they must have found——”

“I said I didn’t want t’ hear nothin’ more about them folks, an’ I don’t,” Mrs. Farnshaw cried, caught on the other horn of the argument and even more deeply offended than before. “She’ll most likely get all your love just like she got all your father’s money last winter. You needn’t mention her here no more. Th’ school directors ’ll be over to see you about fillin’ out that term, to-night,” Mrs. Farnshaw ended shortly, and turned the subject of conversation to other channels.

“Me? To fill out the term?” Elizabeth exclaimed in surprise. “What’s gone wrong with the school here? I don’t want a piece of a term, and I don’t want, ever, to teach in this district where I’ve gone to school.”

“Well, you’re goin’ to,” was the brief reply. “Your pa an’ me told ’em you’d take it.”

“But how does it happen that the school is without a teacher?” Elizabeth asked with curiosity, ignoring the curt disposal of her services. She was accustomed to the peremptory measures of her parents.

“Jake Ransom run him out. He just piked off after he got his money order cashed last Saturday

mornin'."

"And you expect me to take a school that's all upside down from that kind of handling—and me without any experience?"

"You'll take it an' You'll do your best, an' we won't hear no more about it. Here, ma, tie up this finger," Mr. Farnshaw said. He had just come in from the barn in time to hear his daughter's objections.

Later in the evening the directors came. Family pressure was strong, and with reluctance Elizabeth accepted the month yet to be taught. It would help with the interest, and that interest clouded the family sky to the horizon on every side now. Elizabeth was divided between a fear of inability to manage a demoralized school and the desire to add twenty-five dollars to the family revenue. In anticipation she saw the unruly boys supported and encouraged in insubordination by such as Sadie Crane, who was jealously ready to resent her—a former playmate—in the rôle of authority. And to put herself right with the governing board Elizabeth told the new director—Sadie's own father—her fears on that score. 85

"They have played with me and we have had the sort of quarrels all children have, Mr. Crane, and I may not be able to manage them."

Lon Crane was ignorant and uncouth, but big of heart, and the openness of the discussion pleased him.

"You jest take that school, young lady, an' I'll see that my end of th' thing's kep' up. I'll come over there an thrash every mother's son of 'em if I have t'. I'd kind o' like t' lick a few of 'em anyhow, an' if my young ones give any trouble, you jes' stop in on your way home an' I'll see that it don't never happen ag'in."

Half the battle was won; she let him hold her hand a moment at leave-taking while he reinforced his remarks by many repetitions.

"Don't you worry, Sis," he repeated as he backed out of the door; "you needn't be afraid; this here school board's at your back. We know it's a bad school, but, by ginger! we'll see that you're stood by. You jes' let me know if that there Jake Ransom tries any more monkeyshines and I'll tan his hide till It'll be good for shoe leather."

It occurred to Elizabeth that every word they were saying would be carried to the boy long before Monday morning and that a bad matter might from the very goodness of the teller's intentions be made worse.

"How old did you say the Ransom boy was?" she asked with concern. 86

"Fifteen—and a stinker if there ever was one."

"Then I think maybe I'll have a show. I thought he was older than that," she said diplomatically. "Now may I ask that what we have said be kept quiet? I would rather like to have a fair show with him—and I'll admit I'd like to be on good terms. Promise me that what we have said may be a secret even from your own family till after Monday."

Elizabeth went forward and spoke confidentially. The man liked her even better than before.

"I'll do it, by jing!" he exclaimed. "They'll be wantin' t' know soon's ever I get home what we done about it, an' fur once they'll suck their thumbs. Look out fur that boy, though; he's a black sheep that lives around in any flock; ain't got no home. I'll help if I'm needed."

Elizabeth listened closely to all that she heard her brothers say about Jake Ransom, trying to form some estimate of his character, and soon came to the conclusion that whatever else the boy might be, he was at least not to be classed as a sneak. In fact, Jake seemed to have rather a surprising faculty for announcing his policies before he began action.

When school opened Monday morning the bully was easily recognizable. Elizabeth had gone through all the stages of fright, of distaste for the job, and lastly of set determination to show this district that she could take that boy and not only conquer him but become friends with him. Instead of being nervous about the coming encounter, however, Elizabeth grew more steady and self-reliant as she felt his eyes upon her, and actually became interested in the small affairs preceding the ringing of the bell, and forgot him altogether till it was time to call the roll. 87

Jacob Ransom's name came last on the list. A titter ran around the room when it was called. The tone of reply was louder than the rest and defiant of manner. Elizabeth looked around the room with frank inquiry and the titter died down. She let her gaze wander quietly and naturally down the aisle to the seat of the bully and was surprised to find that she liked the boy.

Closing the roll book and following an instinct rather than a formulated plan, Elizabeth walked slowly down the room to his desk. A faint giggle behind her spoke of the hushed expectations of trouble.

"If I hear any more laughing in this room, I shall inquire into the matter," she said sternly, facing about beside Jake's desk.

The instant response to that remark gave her confidence in her own powers. It was the first time she had ever used the tone of authority and she instinctively recognized that the quality of her personality in that position was good. Both she and Jake Ransom were on trial in that room.

"So you are the 'Jake' I have heard about?" she said, looking him frankly in the face and letting him see that she was measuring him openly. "Is your name Jake or Jacob?" she asked, as if it were an important matter to get settled. 88

“Don’t call me Jacob,” the boy snapped.

“I think I like the nickname better myself,” Elizabeth replied easily. Her good fairy beckoned her on. “These children are all laughing because they think we are going to pull each other’s hair presently. We will show them at least that we are a lady and a gentleman, I trust. Let me see your books.” She looked at him with such straightforward sincerity that the boy returned the look in the same spirit.

The books were produced in surprise; this was walking into the middle of the ring and bidding for an *open* fight, if fight they must. The boy loved a square deal. Jake Ransom’s sting had been drawn.

“You are in advance of the rest of the school. Are you preparing for the high school?” Elizabeth asked, emphasizing her surprise.

“Lord, no!” the boy blurted out.

Elizabeth looked through the book in her hand slowly before she asked:

“Why don’t you? I was only about as far along as this in arithmetic last year. Some one said you were ready for it.”

“Oh, I kin do ’rithmetic all right, but I ain’t no good in nothin’ else—an’—an’—wouldn’t I look fine teachin’ school?” Jake Ransom exclaimed, but the bully melted out of him by way of the fact that she had heard good reports of him. He would not smoke this level-eyed girl out of the schoolhouse, nor sprinkle the floor with cayenne, as was the usual proceeding of the country bumpkin who failed to admire his teacher. Jake Ransom was not really a bully; he was a shy boy 89
who had been domineered over by a young popinjay of a teacher who had never taught school before and who had himself many lessons to learn in life’s school. The boy brought out his slate, spit on its grimy surface and wiped it with his sleeve. One of the buttons on his cuff squeaked as he wiped it across, and the children had something tangible to laugh at. Elizabeth was wise enough to take no notice of that laugh.

Some one has said that experience is not as to duration but as to intensity, and it was Elizabeth’s fate to live at great pressure in every important stage of her life. But for the fact that she had made a friend of Jake Ransom that month’s events would have had a different story. Sadie Crane took exceptions to every move made and every mandate issued from the teacher’s desk. The spirit of insubordination to which the entire school had been subjected that winter made good soil for Sadie’s tares. For the most part the dissatisfaction was a subtle thing, an undercurrent of which Elizabeth was aware, but upon which she could lay no finger of rebuke, but at times it was more traceable, and then, to the young teacher’s surprise, Jake Ransom had ways of dealing with the offenders outside of school hours. Sadie’s tongue was sharp and she was accustomed to a wholesome attitude of fear among the scholars, but her first thrusts at Jake had aroused a demon of which she had little dreamed. Jake had no foolish pride and would admit his faults so guilelessly that her satire fell to the ground. He was an entirely new sort to 90
the spiteful child. The terrible advantage the person who will admit his faults cheerfully has over the one who has pride and evades was never more manifest. Jake Ransom pointed out to a credulous following the causes of Sadie’s disaffection, and left the envious child in such a state of futile rage that she was ready to burst with her ill-directed fury. In the end the month’s work had to be granted the tribute of success, and the term closed with a distinct triumph for Elizabeth and the experience of a whole year’s trial crowded into four short weeks.

At home things were not so fortunate. The young girl had come back from Topeka with higher ideals of home life, of personal conduct, and of good manners than she had ever had before. It was so good to have something better, and Elizabeth hungered to pass along the transforming things she had found; but when she tried to give the boys gentle hints about correct ways of eating she was greeted with guffaws and sarcastic chuckles about handling soup with a fork. Mrs. Farnshaw saw nothing but Susan Hornby’s interference, Mr. Farnshaw told her to attend to her own affairs until her help was desired, and when the child was rebuffed and unable to hide her disappointment and retired within herself, both parents resented the evident and growing difference between her and themselves.

It was to escape from a home which was unendurable that Elizabeth flat-footedly, and for the first time, refused to accede to her parents’ authority. When the matter of a spring term of 91
school came up for discussion she refused to teach the home school again, though Mr. Crane had been so pleased with her work that he had offered it to her. When asked if Jake Ransom was the objection she indignantly asserted to the contrary.

“He was the best pupil I had,” she said, “but I don’t want to teach at home, and I won’t do it,” and that was all she would say. She secured a school ten miles north of her home; ten miles had been the nearest point which she would consider.

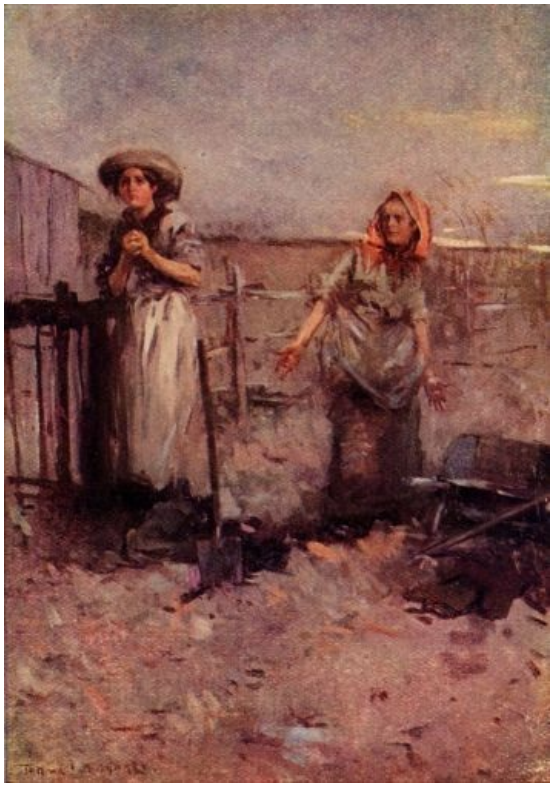
The interest was at last paid, but when the summer groceries were paid for there was no money left with which to go back to Topeka, and it was necessary to teach a winter school. Elizabeth went to work anew to collect funds for another year’s schooling. Mr. Farnshaw sold himself short of corn in the fall, however, and the young girl was expected to make up the deficit. In the spring the interest was to be paid again, and so at the end of a year and a half the situation was unchanged. The next year a threshing machine was added to the family assets, and again the cry of “help” went up, again Elizabeth’s plans were sacrificed. The next year the interest was doubled, and for four years Elizabeth Farnshaw worked against insurmountable odds.

CHAPTER IV

A CULTURED MAN

When no remonstrance of hers availed to prevent the constant increase of expenses, Elizabeth saw that her assistance, instead of helping the family to get out of debt, was simply the means of providing toys for experimentation, and that she was being quietly but persistenly euchred out of all that her heart cherished. Mr. Farnshaw valued the machinery he was collecting about him, Mrs. Farnshaw valued the money, partly because in one way and another it added to the family possessions, and also because her husband having found out that he could obtain it through her easier than by direct appeal, she could avoid unpleasantness with him by insisting upon her daughter giving it to him; but Elizabeth's education was valued by no one but Elizabeth, and unless she were to learn her lesson quickly the time for an education to be obtained would have passed.

"It's of no use for you to talk to me, ma," Elizabeth said the spring after she was twenty years old, "I shall keep every cent I make this summer. Pa gets into debt and won't let anybody help him out, and I am going to go to Topeka this fall. I'm years older right now than the rest of the scholars will be—not a single pupil that was there when I went before will be there—and I'm going to go. I don't ever intend to pay the interest on that old mortgage again—it's just pouring money into a rat-hole!"



"'NOW LOOK HERE, LIZZIE, ... YOUR PA EXPECTS IT'"

It was early morning and they were planting potatoes. Her mother stood with her back turned toward the raw April wind as they talked, her old nubia tied loosely about her head and neck, and her hands red with the cold.

"Now look here, Lizzie"—Mrs. Farnshaw always refused to use the full name—"your pa expects it."

"Of course he expects it; that's why he keeps adding to the mortgage; but that don't make any difference. I'm going to Topeka this fall just the same. I am not going to pay one dollar on the interest in May, and you can tell pa if you like."

Mrs. Farnshaw was alarmed. Elizabeth had protested and tried to beg off from the yearly stipend before, but never in that manner. The tone her daughter had used frightened her and she quivered with an unacknowledged fear. Her husband's wrath was the Sheol she fought daily to avoid. What would become of them if the interest were not paid?

Added to Mrs. Farnshaw's personal desire to command her daughter's funds there was the solid fear of her husband's estimate of her failure. She could not look in his eye and tell him that she was unable to obtain their daughter's consent. To live in the house with him after Lizzie had told him herself was equally unthinkable, for his wrath would be visited upon her own head.

“My child! My child!” she cried, “you don’t have to be told what he will do t’ me.”

There was a long pause while she sobbed. The pause became a compelling one; some one had to speak.

“I can’t help it, ma,” Elizabeth said doggedly after a time.

“Oh, but you don’t know what it means. Come on to th’ house. I can’t work no more, an’ I’ve got t’ talk this thing out with you.”

They picked up the pails and the hoe with which they had been covering the hills and went to the house, carrying a burden that made a potato-planting day a thing of no consequence.

The mother busied herself with the cob fire as she argued, and Elizabeth put away the old mittens with which she had protected her hands from the earth which never failed to leave them chapped, before she picked up the broom and began an onslaught on the red and fluffy dust covering the kitchen floor.

“You see, You’ll go off t’ teach an’ won’t know nothin’ about it, an’—an’—I’ll have it t’ bear an’——” The pause was significant.

Mrs. Farnshaw watched her daughter furtively and strained her ears for signs of giving up. At last Elizabeth said slowly:

“I’m as sorry as I can be, ma, but—I’m twenty years old, and I’ve *got* to go.”

There was no doubting that her mind was made up, and yet her mother threw herself against that stone wall of determination in frantic despair. 95

“Lizzie, Lizzie, Lizzie! I can’t live an’ have you do it. You don’t know, child, what I have to bear.”

“Now look here, ma; you won’t let me have things out openly with pa and come to an understanding with him, and when I told you four years ago that you ought to leave him if you couldn’t live with him peaceably you talked as if I had committed some sort of sin. You and pa are determined to fuss it out and I can’t help it, and I’ve sacrificed four good years to you and the interest is bigger than it ever was. I haven’t helped you one bit. If you want to go on living with him You’ll do it in your own way, but if your life is unbearable, and you want to leave him, I’ll see that you are provided for. The law would give you a share of this——”

The noise of the broom and of their voices had prevented them from hearing any other sounds, but a shadow fell across the middle door and Josiah Farnshaw entered the kitchen a blazing picture of wrath. Before he could speak, however, the dog on the doorstep barked sharply at a stranger who was close upon him, and the irate father was obliged to smooth his manner.

Elizabeth escaped to the bedroom as her father crossed to the kitchen to see what the man wanted, and Mr. Farnshaw went on out to the pens a moment later with the “hog buyer,” as the man proved to be.

“My God! My God! What have you done?” Mrs. Farnshaw cried, following Elizabeth into the bedroom.

“I don’t know, ma,” the girl cried, as white as her mother. “I’m going to get off to hunt up a school while that man is here. The sun has come out and it’s only ten o’clock. If you’re afraid, 96
come along,” she advised, as she hurried into a clean calico dress and took down her old black riding skirt from its nail.

“Lizzie!” the mother exclaimed, as much afraid of the advice as she was of her husband.

There was little time left her for argument, for Elizabeth hurriedly tied a thick green veil over her plain straw hat and left the house. The hog pens were on the opposite side of the stable from the house and Elizabeth soon had Patsie, now a mare of five years, saddled and bridled.

The air was softening, and it occurred to her that it was going to rain, as she hurried out of the yard, but she did not wait to get extra wraps nor her umbrella. The best thing to do, she knew, was to get away while that hog buyer was there and trust to luck for the edge of her father’s anger to wear away before she returned.

Fortunately she had worn her old coat, which was heavy and waterproof, and when it did begin to rain half an hour later, instead of turning back she pressed forward, more afraid of the thunderstorm at home than any to be encountered on the way.

Elizabeth rode steadily southward, thinking out her share in this new quarrel in which she had embroiled her parents, unaware that as it drizzled it became warmer and that the day had become spring-like and endurable. She began to question the propriety of having suggested drastic measures to her mother. “Till death do you part” rang in her ears in spite of the certainty that the union of her mother and her father was an unholy thing which was damning 97
them more surely than a separation could possibly do. Of only one thing could Elizabeth be sure: she saw without mistake at last that she must decide upon her own duties hereafter without listening to a mother who could not decide anything for herself.

The director of the district to which Elizabeth first turned her steps was away from home when she arrived and it was necessary to consider where she would go next. After some thought she decided to try the Chamberlain district, which lay between there and her home. It was eight miles from the Farnshaw homestead and far enough away so that she would not have to board with her parents and she determined to try to meet the school board, which met usually on the first Tuesday night in April.

The fact of facing around toward the north again set her to considering what course of action she would pursue when she went back home.

“I’ll go back, I guess, and be patient with whatever he feels like doing with me,” she resolved, reflecting that from her father’s standpoint he had a very real grievance against her. “It was a dreadful thing for him to hear me advising ma to leave him. I guess I owe it to them to try to straighten it up. But I don’t believe it can ever be straightened up,” she ended doubtfully.

Elizabeth was passing a grove of young cottonwood trees and was so absorbed in her thoughts that, becoming only half conscious that Patsie was lagging and that time was passing rapidly, she gave her a slap with the strap in her hand, urging the horse to a faster pace as she rounded 98
the corner of the section without looking up. Patsie broke into a long, easy lope. Suddenly Elizabeth became conscious of the noise of other hoofs splashing toward them. Glancing up, she saw a farm team almost upon them, whose driver was stooped to avoid the rain.

Elizabeth pulled her horse up sharply, and to one side. The trail was an old one, and the sloping, washed-out rut was deep. Patsie lost her footing and, after a slipping plunge or two, fell floundering on her side before her mistress could support her with the rein. Active as a boy, Elizabeth loosened her foot from the stirrup and flung herself to the other side of the road, out of the way of the dangerous hoofs. Elizabeth slipped as her feet struck the ground and she landed on “all-fours” in the grass.

The young man, suddenly awake to what had happened, was out of his high seat and had the mare by the bridle before its rider had fairly scrambled up.

“I beg your pardon! Are you hurt?” he called across the wagon, when Patsie, still nervous from her fall, hung back as far as her rein would permit and not only refused to be led but threatened to break away altogether.

“Not at all! Not a bit! Whoa! Patsie! Whoa! Lady!” Elizabeth cried, coming around to them, and extending a smeary, dripping hand for the taut rein.

The young man let her step in front of him and put her hand on the strap, but kept his own there as well, while they both followed the backing horse with braced steps, the girl talking soothingly to the frightened animal the while. The naturally docile filly responded to the voice she had 99
heard from earliest colthood and soon let Elizabeth approach close enough to put her hand on the bit. The seriousness of the affair gave way to the comic when the horse began to snatch bits of grass from the roadside.

The young couple laughed and looked at each other rather sheepishly as they saw that further cooperation was not needed. They untangled their hands where they had slipped tight together in the loop of the bridle rein as they had followed the rearing beast.

“She has broken the girth,” the young man said, lifting his hat ceremoniously and with a manner not born of life on the farm.

He threw the stirrup over the top of the saddle and fished under the now quiet horse for her dangling surcingle. Having secured it, he untied the strap and examined it to see if it were sufficiently long to permit of tying another knot. Deciding that it was, he tied one end in the ring in the saddle and, passing the other through the ring of the girth, drew it up with a strong, steady pull. His side face against the saddle, as he pulled, permitted him to examine curiously the young girl in front of him.

“Are you sure you are not hurt at all?” he asked solicitously.

“Not a bit—only muddy,” she replied, stooping to brush her earth-stained hands through the rain-laden grass at the roadside. He was still working with the straps when her hands were cleaned and watched her openly as she shielded her face behind Patsie’s head while waiting. 100
The water dripped from the ends of her braided brown hair and the long dark lashes of her brown eyes were mist-laden also. He examined all the accoutrements of her mount minutely. When at last it occurred to her that he was giving them extra attention for the sake of extending the time Elizabeth’s eyes lighted up with a humorous twinkle. The young man caught and rightly interpreted the expression and was embarrassed.

“I think it’s all right,” he said quickly. “I’m awfully sorry to have been so stupid. I never thought of meeting any one in all this rain.”

Elizabeth took that as a reflection upon her presence out of doors on such a day, and leading her horse down into the deep road sprang into the saddle from the bank before he could offer his assistance.

“Thank you for helping me,” she said, and was off toward the west before he could speak.

She was gone, and he could do nothing but look after her helplessly.

“Your horse has lamed itself,” he called when he was at last able to concern himself with such matters, but either the spattering hoofbeats prevented her hearing his voice or she was determined not to reply; he could not tell which. There was nothing to do but return to his wagon.

“Confound it!” he exclaimed. “Now you’ve made an ass of yourself and let her get away without finding out who she was or where she lived.” He liked her—and he was an ass! He anathematized himself openly. 101

When well away from the man, Elizabeth saw that his observation regarding the prospects of meeting people on such a day was a perfectly natural one and not aimed at her at all. She

laughed at the spectacle she was sure she must have presented, and wished now that she had not been in such a hurry in leaving him. Here was a man worth looking at. The gesture as he had lifted his hat indicated refinement.

“Curious that I haven’t seen him—he lives here some where,” she pondered, and now that she could not find out she rated herself severely for the embarrassment which was apt to assail her at critical moments.

Patsie limped miserably, and Elizabeth brought her down to a walk and let her droop along the old country road, and speculated on this new specimen of masculinity which had dropped from the skies to puzzle and delight her soul.

The rain beat heavily now, and Elizabeth began to take her situation into account after thinking over the stranger a few minutes. There was a perfect deluge of water from the burdened sky, and though no sign of a house could be seen, she knew she could not be far from the Chamberlain homestead; but the ground was becoming more and more soggy, and her garments were not of the heaviest. Patsie’s feet went ploop, ploop, ploop, in the soft, muddy road. Elizabeth urged her to the fastest possible walking speed in spite of her lameness. To trot or gallop was impossible, and the young horse slipped now and then in a manner which would have unseated a less skilful rider.

The sodden Kansas road was aflood with this spring rain. Patsie laboured heavily and Elizabeth gave herself up to her cogitations again. Her mind had reacted to more pleasant subjects than home affairs.

It had been a dreary, disheartening ride, and yet it had had its compensations, for was not the rider young and the earth filled with the freshness of spring? The short and tender grass bordered the road to the very wheel-ruts; the meadow larks sang regardless of the rain, or mayhap in sheer meadow-lark delight because of it. To the south a prairie chicken drummed, and a cow called to her calf, whose reply came from a point still farther in the distance. At the sound of the cow’s lowing Elizabeth Farnshaw peered delightedly through mists.

“I knew it couldn’t be much farther, Patsie,” she said, leaning forward and patting the neck of the dripping horse. Little spurts of water flew spatteringly from under the affectionate palm, and Elizabeth shook her bare hand to free it from the wet hairs which adhered to it, laughing at her rainsoaked condition.

It was indeed a time for seeking shelter.

Presently the rattle of a chain was heard nearby, then the outlines of a straw stable were seen, and from the foreground of mist a man appeared unhitching a team of horses from a large farm wagon. Patsie gave a little nicker of anticipation as she scented the sacks of oats, carefully covered, in the back of the wagon. The old man rose from his stooping position in unfastening the tugs and faced the newcomer.

“Why, it’s Miss Farnshaw! Gee whiz! Be you a duck t’ be out on such a day as this?” he inquired, stepping forward when he saw that she was coming in. Then chuckling at his own humour, he added:

“I guess you be a goslin’—a goslin’ bein’ a young goose, you know.”

Elizabeth Farnshaw laughed. “But my feathers aren’t turning the rain, Mr. Chamberlain.” It was the second time within the hour that she had been reminded that women were not expected to go out of doors in a rainstorm.

“That’s because you’re such a young goose, you know; you ain’t got no feathers yet, it’s only down.”

“Fairly caught!” she replied, backing her horse around so that the rain would come from behind, “Tell me, does the school board meet to-night?”

“Oh, ho!” the farmer replied, “that’s th’ way th’ wind blows, is it? Now look here, young lady, if you be as prompt in lickin’ them youngsters in season an’ out o’ season as you be in lookin’ up schools I guess You’ll do. Yes, sir-ee, th’ school board meets to-night an’ you jes’ come t’ th’ house an’ have a bite t’ eat an’ we’ll see what we can do for you. Why, stars an’ garters!” he exclaimed as he lifted her down from her horse, “Liza Ann ’ll have t’ put you in th’ oven along with th’ rest of th’ goslins.” Then he added: “Now you run along to th’ house, an’ I’ll take this horse in hand. I judge by its nicker you didn’t stop for no dinner to-day.”

Mrs. Chamberlain appeared at the door and her husband called to her,

“Liza Ann! here’s Miss Farnshaw, as wet as that last brood of chickens you found under th’ corn-planter. Give ’er a dry pair of shoes an’ take ’er wet coat off o’ ’er.”

As Elizabeth turned to her hostess, the old man exclaimed, “Why, Gosh all Friday, what’s happened to your horse?”

“I’m awfully worried about Patsie’s foot. She slipped in the muddy road this afternoon. Do you suppose It’ll lay her up? It’s a busy time and pa needs her.”

“I don’t know; it’s in a ticklish place. I’ll rub it good with Mustang liniment; that’s th’ best thing I know of. Now you run on to th’ house; you’re wet enough t’ wake up lame yourself in th’ mornin’,” he admonished, straightening up, with his hands on the small of his back.

Having dismissed Elizabeth, Silas Chamberlain took Patsie’s saddle from her back and laid it across Old Queen’s harness, taking his own team into the barn first. Old Queen was an unsocial

animal and it was necessary to tie her in the far stall when a strange horse was brought into the barn, as she had a way of treating intruders badly. She sniffed at the saddle distrustfully as Mr. Chamberlain tied her up.

"Whoa! there!" he said emphatically, giving her a slap on the flank which sent her into the opposite corner of the stall. "You needn't be s' all fired touchy you can't let a strange saddle come into th' stall. That saddle's carried th' pluckiest girl in this end of th' county t'day. Gosh-a-livin's! Think of her a comin' out on a day like this, an' smilin' at them wet feathers, as she called 'em, 's if it didn't make no difference bein' wet at all. Now if John Hunter gets his eyes on 'er there'll be an end of ma's board money; an' then how'll I finish payin' fur that sewin' machine?"

In the house, after some time spent in trying to be stiffly polite to her guest, the unwilling hostess began the supper. The potatoes were put on to fry, the kettle sang, and Mrs. Chamberlain sat down to grind the coffee in a mill which she grasped firmly between her knees.

"Maybe you 'uns don't drink coffee?" she remarked anxiously, stopping to look over at the girl, who sat near the fire drying her shoes in the oven.

"Oh, yes," Elizabeth answered slowly, coming back reluctantly from a consideration of the handsome stranger she had met; "that is," she added confusedly, "I never drink anything but water, anyhow."

Mrs. Chamberlain gave a relieved sigh. "I was afraid you'd rather have tea, an' I ain't got no tea in th' house. Bein' farmin' season now it seems as if I can't never get t' town."

Just then one adventurous chick which, with the rest of the brood, had been discovered under the corn-planter earlier in the day, jumped out of the box in which it had been kept near the fire. Mrs. Chamberlain set the mill on the table and gave chase to the runaway.

"That's th' peertest chicken of th' lot," she remarked as she again enveloped him in the old woollen skirt, from the folds of which came much distressed cheeping. "They're hungry, I think," she added, reaching for a bowl of yellow cornmeal which she mixed with water. Lifting the skirt off the little brood carefully, and giving it a cautious shake to assure herself that no unwary chick was caught in its folds, she dropped some of the mixture in the middle of the box, tapping lightly with the spoon to call the attention of the chicks to its presence. The chickens pecked hungrily, and there was a satisfied note in the twitterings of the downy little group as Mrs. Chamberlain turned to the preparation of her supper again.

"Yes, he's th' peertest chicken of th' lot; an' I'd most as soon he'd been more like th' rest—he's always gettin' out of th' box."

"Now, Liza Ann, you ain't thinkin' nothin' of th' kind," said her husband, who had hurried with his evening chores so as to get a chance to visit with the company and had just come in from the stable. "You know you said yourself, 'Thank goodness, there's one on 'em alive,' when you fished 'em out from under that planter. Th' same thing's keeping 'im on th' go now that kept 'im from givin' up as quick as th' rest did then. Chicken's is like boys, Miss Farnshaw," Silas continued, addressing Elizabeth; "th' ones that makes th' most trouble when thy're little, you can count on as bein' th' most likely when they're growed up. Now, Liza Ann there counted on that chicken soon's ever she set eyes on 'im."

Having washed his face and hands in the tin basin on the bench just outside the kitchen door, Silas Chamberlain combed his curly locks of iron gray before the little looking glass which was so wrinkled that he looked like some fantastic caricature when mirrored on its surface. After a short grace at the opening of the meal, he passed a dish of potatoes, remarking:

"We ain't much hands t' wait on th' table, Miss Farnshaw; You'll have t' reach an' help yourself."

"Who's this plate for?" Elizabeth asked at last, designating the vacant place at her side.

"That's John's," said Mrs. Chamberlain.

"John Hunter's, Miss Farnshaw," said Silas. "He's our boarder, an' th' likeliest young man in these parts." Then he added with conviction, "You two be goin' t' like each other."

A girlish blush covered the well-tanned cheeks, and to hide her embarrassment Elizabeth said with a laugh:

"Describe this beau ideal of yours."

"Now, Si, do let th' child alone," Mrs. Chamberlain protested. "He's always got t' tease," she added deprecatingly.

"Sometimes I be an' sometimes not. Miss Farnshaw made me think of you some way when I see her this afternoon." Noting his wife's look of surprise, he explained: "I mean when I see you down to th' Cherryvale meetin' house. An' it didn't take me long t' make up my mind after that, neither."

Mrs. Chamberlain smiled at the mention of girlhood days, but said nothing, and Silas turned to Elizabeth again with his honest face alight with memories of youth.

"You see, Miss Farnshaw, I'd gone out on th' hunt of a stray calf, an' an unexpected shower came on—th' kind that rains with th' sun still a shinin'—an' I dug my heels into old Charlie's flanks an' hurried along down th' road to th' meeting house, a few rods farther on, when what should I see but a pretty girl on th' steps of that same place of refuge! Well, I begged 'er pardon, but I stayed on them there steps till that shower cleared off. Most of th' time I was a

prayin' that another cloud would appear, an' I didn't want it no bigger than a man's hand neither. No, sir-ee, I wouldn't 'a' cared if it'd 'a' been as big as th' whole Bay of Biscay. An' what I was thinkin' jest now was that there was about th' same fundamental differences 'tween you an' John Hunter that th' was 'tween Liza Ann an' me. He's light haired an' blue eyed, an tall an' slim, an' he's openin' up a new farm, an' 'll need a wife. He talks of his mother comin' out t' keep house for him, but, law's sakes! she wasn't raised on a farm an' wouldn't know nothin' about farm work. Oh, yes, I forgot t' tell you th' best part of my story: I got t' carry Miss Liza Ann Parkins home on old Charlie, 'cause th' crick rose over th' banks outen th' clouds of rain I prayed for!"

"Now, Si Chamberlain, there ain't a word of truth in that, an' you know it," said his wife, passing Elizabeth a hot biscuit. "I walked home by th' turnpike road, Miss Farnshaw, though we did wait a bit, till it dried up a little."

Her husband's laugh rang out; he had trapped Liza Ann into the discussion, in spite of herself, and he had trapped her into an admission as well.

"Well," he said, "I may be mistaken about th' details, but I've always had a soft spot in my heart for th' rainy days since that particular time."

"But you haven't told me why Mr. Hunter isn't here to eat his supper," said Elizabeth, "nor have you told me what he is like."

"Oh, he's gone over to Colebyville for his mail, an' won't be home till late—in all this mud. As to what he's like—it ain't easy t' tell what John's like; he's—he's a university feller; most folks say he's a dude, but we like him?"

"What university?" Elizabeth asked with a quick indrawn breath; she knew now whom she had met on the road that afternoon.

"He comes from Illinois. I guess it's th' State University—I never asked him. His father died an' left him this land an' he's come out here to farm it. Couldn't plow a straight furrow t' save his life when he come a little over a year ago, but he's picked up right smart," Silas added, thereby giving the information the young girl wanted.

This young man was to be in this neighbourhood all summer. Still another reason for applying for the Chamberlain school.

As Elizabeth helped Liza Ann with her dishwashing after supper, John Hunter came in. The ground had been too soft for them to hear the wagon when he drove up. Silas introduced them promptly and added with a grin:

"You've heard of folks that didn't know enough t' come in out of th' rain? Well, that's her!"

John Hunter's eyes twinkled an amused recognition, but he did not mention the accident in which Patsie had come to grief.

"I am very glad to meet you, Miss Farnshaw; we are both wet weather birds."

Seeing Liza Ann reach for a frying pan, he addressed himself to her:

"Never mind any supper for me, Mrs. Chamberlain. I knew I'd be late, as I had to go around by Warren's after I got back, and I got an early supper at the new hotel before I left town!"

"The extravagance of that!" exclaimed Mrs. Chamberlain, to whom hotel bills were unknown.

John Hunter went to the door to clean some extra mud off his boot tops, and to hide a wide and fatuous smile at the thought of tricking Silas out of his accustomed joke. He felt nearer the girl, because she too had been silent regarding the afternoon encounter. He liked the mutuality of it and resolved that it should not be the last touch of that sort between them. While not really intellectual, John Hunter had the polish and tastes of the college man, and here he reflected was a girl who seemed near being on his own level. She looked, he thought, as if she could see such small matters as bespattered clothes.

Silas followed him out. "You didn't bed them horses down did you?" he asked.

"No. I expect we'd better do it now and have it out of the way."

As they entered the dark stable and felt their way along the back of the little alley, behind the stalls, for the pitchforks, the younger man asked indifferently:

"Who did you say the young lady was?"

"Oh, ho!" shouted Silas; "it didn't take you long. I knew you'd be courtin' of me along with your questions. Now look here, John Hunter, you can't go an' carry this schoolma'am off till this here term's finished. I look fur Carter an' that new director over to-night, for a school meetin', an' I'm blamed if I'm goin' t' have you cuttin' into our plans—no, sirr-ee—she's t' be left free t' finish up this school, anyhow, if I help 'er get it."

"No danger! You get her the school; but how does she come to have that air away out here? Does she come from some town near here?"

"Town nothin'! She was jest raised on these prairies, same as th' rest of us. Ain't she a dandy! No, sir—'er father's a farmer—'bout as common as any of us, an' she ain't had no different raisin'. She's different in 'erself somehow. Curious thing how one body'll have a thing an' another won't, an' can't seem t' get it, even when he wants it an' tries. Now you couldn't make nothin' but jest plain farmer out of me, no matter what you done t' me."

“Do you think they’ll give her the school?” John asked.

Silas’s laugh made the young man uncomfortable. He had intended to avoid the necessity for it, but had forgotten himself. 112

“There’s Carter now,” was all the reply the old man gave as he moved toward the door, which he could dimly see now that he had been in the darkness long enough for his eyes to become accustomed to it. The splashing footsteps of a horse and the voice of a man cautioning it came from toward the road.

“That you, Carter?” Silas called.

“Yes. This ground’s fairly greasy to-night,” answered the voice.

“Bring your horse in here; there’s room under cover for it,” was the rejoinder.

They tied it in the darkness, feeling their way from strap to manger. “The Farnshaw girl’s here waitin’ fur th’ school.”

“Glad of that,” replied the newcomer. “I don’t know her very well, but they say she can handle youngsters. She’s had some extry schoolin’ too. Don’t know as that makes any difference in a summer term, but it’s never in th’ way.”

The young man slipped out of the stable, intending to get a word with the new teacher before the others came to the house. The school was assured to her with two members of the board in her favour, he reflected. Liza Ann had gone to the other room, and finding the way clear he asked in a half whisper:

“Did you lame your horse badly?” And when Elizabeth only nodded and looked as if she hoped her hostess had not heard, John Hunter was filled with joy. The mutuality of the reticence put them on the footing of good fellowship. There was no further opportunity for conversation, as they heard Silas and Carter on the step and a third party hail them from a distance. 113

There was a moment’s delay and when the door did at last open Elizabeth Farnshaw gave a glad cry:

“Uncle Nate! Where in the world did you come from?”

She caught Nathan Hornby by the lapels of his wet overcoat and stood him off from her, looking at him in such a transport of joy that they were the centre of an admiring and curious group instantly.

While Nathan explained that they had only last month traded their wooded eighty for a hundred and sixty acres of prairie land in this district, and that it had been their plan to surprise her the next Sunday by driving over to see her before she had heard that they were in that part of the state, Elizabeth sat on the edge of the wood-box and still held to his coat as if afraid the vision might vanish from her sight, and asked questions twice as fast as the pleased old man could answer them, and learned that Nathan had been appointed to fill out the unexpired term of the moderator of the Chamberlain school district, with whom he had traded for the land. The business of the evening was curtailed to give the pair a chance to talk, and when the contract was signed, Elizabeth said that she would go home with Nathan, and John Hunter thrust himself into the felicitous arrangement by taking the young girl over in his farm wagon, it being decided that Patsie’s lameness made it best for her to remain housed in Silas’s barn for the night. 114

It was a mile and a half along soggy roads to Nathan Hornby’s, and John Hunter made as much of the time fortune had thrown at him as possible. They sat under one umbrella, and found the distance short, and John told her openly that he was glad she was to be in his neighbourhood.

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CHAPTER V

REACHING HUNGRY HANDS TOWARD A SYMBOL

Susan Hornby’s delight over Elizabeth’s coming was the most satisfying thing Nathan had seen since his return from Topeka. He had traded the land to please his wife, by getting nearer Elizabeth, but the presence of the girl in the house was so overwhelmingly surprising that Susan was swept by its very suddenness into shedding tears of actual joy. Elizabeth was put to the disconcerting necessity of explaining that her mother somewhat resented Aunt Susan’s influence upon her daughter’s life when she found her friends enthusiastically planning visits in the near future. She softened the details as much as possible and passed it over as only a bit of maternal jealousy, but was obliged to let this dear friend see that it was rather a serious matter in her calculations. Susan Hornby now understood why Elizabeth had never visited her in these four years.

With the eyes of love Aunt Susan saw that four years in a position of authority had ripened her darling, and made of her a woman of wit and judgment, who could tell a necessary thing in a right manner or with a reserve which was commendable. Eagerly she studied her to see what 116

the changes of those formative years had brought her. She listened to Elizabeth's plans for going to Topeka, and rejoiced that the intellectual stimulus was still strong in her. Elizabeth was obliged to explain away her parent's attitude regarding further education, and left much for the older woman to fill in by her intuitions and experience of the world, but there again Susan Hornby saw evidences of strength which made her feel that the loss was offset by power gained. Elizabeth Farnshaw had matured and had qualities which would command recognition. John Hunter had shown that he recognized them—a thing which Elizabeth without egotism also knew.

It was a new experience to go to sleep thinking of any man but Hugh. In the darkness of the little bedroom in which Elizabeth slept that night Hugh's priority was met face to face by John Hunter's proximity. Possession is said to be nine points in the law, and John Hunter was on the ground. The girl had been shut away from those of her kind until her hungry hands in that hour of thought, reached out to the living presence of the cultured man, and her hungry heart prayed to heaven that she might not be altogether unpleasing to him.

In the hour spent with John Hunter she had learned that he had come to Kansas to open a farm on the only unmortgaged piece of property which his father had left him when he died; that his mother intended to come to him as soon as he had a house built; and by an accidental remark she had also learned that there were lots in some eastern town upon which enough money could be raised to stock the farm with calves and that it was the young man's intention to farm this land himself. It seemed so incredible that John Hunter should become a farmer that by her astonished exclamation over it she had left him self-satisfied at her estimate of his foreignness to the life he was driven to pursue. 117

Elizabeth saw that if John Hunter must needs run a farm that he would do his best at it, but that he did not wish to *appear* one with a rôle, and being young and with her own philosophy of life in a very much muddled condition, she liked him the better for it. Crucified daily by the incongruities of her own home, she craved deliverance from it and all it represented.

Just now Elizabeth Farnshaw was going home with something akin to fear in her heart. She rated herself soundly for the useless advice she had thrust upon her mother and for the entangling difficulties which her thoughtless words had produced. That the union of her parents was unclean, that it was altogether foul and by far worse than a divorce, she still felt confident, but she saw that her mother was totally unable to comprehend the difference between a clean separate life and the nagging poison dealt out as daily bread to the husband with whom she lived; but she saw that because of that very inability to understand the difference, the mother must be left to find the light in her own way. In her desire to help, Elizabeth had but increased her mother's burdens, and she tried to assume an attitude of added tenderness toward her in her own mind, and puckered her young face into a frown as she let Patsie limp slowly from one low hill to another. 118

"I'll do everything I can to square the deal for ma," she resolved, but in her heart there was a sick suspicion that all she could do was not much, and that it had small chance really to avail.

Elizabeth had started early for home, but the sun rode high in the heavens before she arrived. Albert, who was herding the cattle on the short grass a half mile from home, warned her as she passed that she would do well to hurry to the house.

"Pa waited for you to do the milking, Bess, an' you didn't come. He's mad as a hornet, an' You'll have t' bring th' cows out after he gets through."

It was a friendly warning. To be milking at that hour, when all the men in the neighbourhood were already following plow and harrow, was an important matter on the farm. Plainly it had been arranged to make Elizabeth feel a hindrance to the business of getting in the crops, and it was with increased apprehension that she approached home.

The storm broke as soon as she was within hailing distance.

"It's time you brought that horse home, young lady. You see to it that it's harnessed for th' drag as quick as ever you can. Next time you get a horse You'll know it."

When Elizabeth started on and Mr. Farnshaw saw that Patsie was lame his anger knew no bounds, and the sound of his exasperated voice could have been heard half a mile away as he poured out a stream of vituperation. 119

Elizabeth dodged into the barn as soon as its friendly door could be reached, thankful that the cows were as far as they were from it. Joe was harnessing a team in the far corner.

"You better shy around pa, Sis; and get t' th' house," he cautioned.

"All right. He told me to harness Patsie, but she's so lame I know she can't work—what will I do?"

"If she can't work, she can't. How did it happen?"

"She strained herself just before I got to Mr. Chamberlain's. I was passing a young man by the name of Hunter and she fell flat. Say, do you know anything about Mr. Hunter?"

"Yes, yes. Jimmie Crane says he's a stuck-up, who's goin' t' show us country jakes how t' farm; but th' best thing you can do is t' get in an' not let pa get any excuse for a row."

Mr. Farnshaw had taken the milkpails to the house while they were talking and it was Elizabeth's fate to encounter him on the doorstep as she ran up to the kitchen door.

"Where were you last night?"

“I’m awfully sorry about the horse, pa. I hurried this morning, but Patsie was so lame and I had to come all the way from the Chamberlain district. The Haddon school board didn’t meet this week and the director of number Twelve was away, and it was so late last night that I couldn’t get home.”

“Oh, you’ve always got a good excuse. I bet you didn’t get a school after all.”

Elizabeth had been edging toward the door as her father was speaking and now made her escape to the inside of the house as she replied over her shoulder in a perfectly respectful tone:

“Oh, yes, I did, and it begins Monday.”

“Well, it’s better than I expected. Now see to it that you get that riding skirt off an’ come an’ drive my team while I finish them oats.”

The daughter stopped where she stood and was going to reply that she must get ready if she were to go to Aunt Susan’s the next day, but on second thought closed her mouth down firmly. She knew she would do well if she escaped with no harder tax laid upon her temper than that of putting off her arrival at the Hornby home, and she turned to do as she was bidden.

When Elizabeth found her homecoming unpleasant and her father sullen and evidently nursing his wrath, she faced the storm without protest, took all that was said quietly, helped in the fields and endeavoured to make up for her unfortunate words in every helpful way possible. In all, she was so subtly generous with her assistance that it was impossible to bring on a quarrel with her, and the sour demeanour of her father was so carefully handled that Friday arrived without an open break having occurred. A new dress had been one of the longed-for accomplishments of the week’s work, but certain of Aunt Susan’s help when she was safely entrenched in her home, Elizabeth retired to the attic whenever she saw her father approach the house. His attitude was threatening, but the anxious girl was able to delay the encounter. It could only be *delayed*, for Mr. Farnshaw made a virtue of not forgetting unpleasant things.

The only unfortunate occurrence of the week was the presence of Sadie Crane and her mother when Mr. Hunter drove up to the back door for Elizabeth’s trunk, but even this had had its beneficial side, for Josiah Farnshaw had been mending harness, because a shower had made the ground too wet to plow, and the presence of neighbours made it possible to get the trunk packed without unpleasantness. When John Hunter drove up to the back door, Mr. Farnshaw rose from his chair beside the window and went to help put his daughter’s possessions in the wagon. Sadie crossed over to the window to get a look at Lizzie’s new beau.

Sadie Crane was now sixteen years old, and being undersized and childish of appearance had never had the pleasure of the company of a young man. The yearning in her pettish face as she stood unevenly on the discarded harness, looking out of the window toward John Hunter, caught Elizabeth’s attention and illuminated the whole affair to the older girl.

“Dude!” Sadie exclaimed spitefully, facing about and evidently offering insult.

But Elizabeth Farnshaw had seen the unsatisfied look which preceded the remark and it was excused. Sadie was just Sadie, and not to be taken seriously.

“He’d better soak his head; he can’t farm.”

No one replied, and Elizabeth said hurried good-byes and escaped.

But though Sadie Crane was undersized and spoke scornfully, she was old enough to feel a woman’s desires and dream a woman’s dreams. She watched the pair drive away together in pleasant converse on the quilt-lined spring seat of the farm wagon, and swallowed a sob.

“Lizzie always had th’ best of everything,” she reflected.

The roads were slippery and gave an excuse for driving slowly, and the young man exerted himself to be agreeable. The distaste for the presence of the Cranes at her home when he came for her, his possible opinion of her family and friends, the prolonged struggle with her father, even the headache from which she had not been free for days, melted out of Elizabeth’s mind in the joy of that ride, and left it a perfect experience. It began to rain before they were halfway to their destination, and they sat shoulder to shoulder under the umbrella, with one of the quilts drawn around both. There was a sack of butterscotch, and they talked of Scott, and Dickens, and the other books Elizabeth Farnshaw had absorbed from Aunt Susan’s old-fashioned library; and Elizabeth was surprised to find that she had read almost as much as this college man, and still more surprised to find that she remembered a great deal more of what she had read than he seemed to do. She asked many questions about his college experiences and learned that he had lacked but a year and a half of graduation.

“Why didn’t you finish?” she asked curiously.

“Well, you know, father died, and I didn’t have hardly enough to finish on, so I thought I’d come out here and get to making something. I didn’t care to finish. I’d had my fun out of it. I wish I hadn’t gone at all. If I’d gone into the office with my father and been admitted to the Bar it would have been better for me. I wouldn’t have been on the farm then,” he said regretfully.

“Then why didn’t you go into the law? You could have made it by yourself,” Elizabeth said, understanding that it hurt John Hunter’s pride to farm.

The young man shrugged his dripping shoulders and pulled the quilt tighter around them as he answered indifferently:

“Not very well. Father left very little unmortgaged except mother’s own property, and I thought

I'd get out of Canton. It ain't easy to live around folks you know unless you have money."

"But you could have worked your way through college; lots of boys do it," the girl objected.

"Not on your life!" John Hunter exclaimed emphatically. "I don't go to college that way." After a few moments' musing he added slowly, "I'll make money enough to get out of here after a while."

"I only wish I'd had your chance," Elizabeth said with a sigh.

"Let's talk about something cheerful," young Hunter replied, when he realized that the ride was nearly over. "When may I come to see you again?" he asked. "You are to see a good deal of me 124
this summer if you will permit it."

Elizabeth Farnshaw caught a happy breath before she replied. He wanted to come; she was to see much of him this summer if she would permit it! Could nature and fate ask for more?

When Elizabeth arrived, the old couple bustled about the bright carpeted room, making it comfortable, and cooing over the return of their prodigal, till a heaven of homeness was made of her advent.

Half an hour later Elizabeth, dry and warm and with a cup of tea beside her which she had found it easier to accept than to refuse, looked about her and invoiced the changes of four years which in her preoccupied state of mind during her former visit she had neglected to think upon. There were many little changes in the household arrangement, due to the observations of the winter spent in Topeka. In personal appearance Aunt Susan herself showed improvement.

When Elizabeth's attention was turned to Nathan, however, the glad little enumeration became a more sober one. In the days when they had fed the motherless Patsie together Nathan Hornby had been portly, even inclined to stoutness, and his face, though tough from wind and sun, inclined to be ruddy. The genial gray eyes had sparkled with confidence in himself and good-will toward all about him. At Silas Chamberlain's house a week ago the girl had noticed that Nathan let others arrange the business details of contracts and credentials, but his joy at meeting her 125
had obscured the habitual sadness of his present manner. She had noticed that he was thinner, but to-night she saw the waste and aging which had consumed him. The belt line which had bulged comfortably under the vest of five years ago was flat and flabby, the thick brown hair which had shown scarcely a thread of white was now grizzled and thin, the ruddy cheeks had fallen in, and two missing lower teeth made him whistle his s'es through the gap with a sound unlike his bluff speech of their first acquaintance, so that without the face which accompanied the words she could hardly have recognized the connection between the man who had and the man who did embody the same personality. The cogitations of the first half hour in the white counterpaned bed that night left Elizabeth in a maze of wonder over his physical as well as mental collapse.

Aunt Susan was evidently aware of changes also, for she hovered over him solicitously. Nathan Hornby was a broken man.

School opened auspiciously on Monday; John Hunter came and stayed to walk home with Elizabeth on Tuesday afternoon, and the glad weeks which followed were but the happy record of so many rides, walks, and talks, and the dreams of Elizabeth Farnshaw and John Hunter. He was with the girl daily. Elizabeth never expressed the smallest desire for anything human hand could obtain for her that John Hunter did not instantly assure her that she should receive it. If she stayed to sweep out the schoolhouse, John would almost certainly appear at the door before 126
she had finished—his fields commanded a view of her comings and goings—if she went to Carter's to have a money order cashed he accompanied her; if she wished to go anywhere she had but to mention it and John Hunter and his team were at her service.

Elizabeth could not have been otherwise than happy. The spring, with its freshness and promise, was symbolical of the gladsome currents of her life that joyous April and May. Her lightest wish was the instant consideration of the man she admired above all others, and that man, in refinement of appearance and knowledge of the world, was as far above those of the country community in which they lived as the sun was above the smoky kerosene lamps by which the members of that community lighted themselves to bed.

John Hunter, during the season of his courtship, served the girl of his choice almost upon his knees. He made her feel that she could command his services, his time, and himself. By his request he ceased to ask when he could come again, but encouraged, even commanded, her to tell him when and where she wished to be taken and to let him come to see her unannounced. He paid tribute to her as if she had been a goddess and he her devotee.

Silas looked on and chuckled.

"Didn't take 'em long," he remarked to Liza Ann, and when as usual his wife did not reply, he added: "Glad we're to have 'em for neighbours. She's about th' liveliest meadow lark on these prairies, an' if she don't sing on a fence post it's 'cause she ain't built that way, an' can't; she's 127
full enough to."

Susan Hornby looked on and had her misgivings. She saw the devotion the young man poured out at her darling's feet, and she knew that it was the fervour of the courting time in a man's life that made him abandon his own interests and plans while he plumed himself and pursued his desired mate. She saw the rapturous, dreamy look of love and mating time in Elizabeth's eyes, and she knew that the inevitable had happened, but she was not content. Premonitions which she sought to strangle shook her whenever the pair wandered away on real or fictitious errands.

She saw that no word of love had yet been spoken, but every look cried it aloud and the day could not be far distant.

Between corn planting and corn plowing the foundations of the new house had been laid and work on it had progressed fitfully and whenever the young man could find time to help the occasional mason who laid brick and stone for simple foundations, and who had crops of his own to tend between times. The work had progressed slowly, but at last the wall had been finished and the carpenters had come to do their share. It gave excuse for many trips in the evening twilight. They usually went on horseback, and Silas's pony with Liza Ann's sidesaddle on its back had more business on hand that month than in all the other years of its lazy existence.

Susan Hornby watched the pair ride away one evening the first week in June. Nathan stood at her side on the doorstep.

"Of course he loves her; how could he help it? and yet——"

"And yet, what?" Nathan asked impatiently. "She wants him, an' he wants her, an' you stand there lookin' as if that wasn't enough."

Susan Hornby turned to her husband with some uncertainty regarding his comprehension of the subject, and with a gentle patience with his mood. Nathan was often impatient of late.

"Yes, I know—only it seems as if——"

"Well, now what's lacking?" her husband asked when she again broke off the sentence doubtfully. "He's got a good farm, an' he needs a wife to help him run it. From what he says, his mother's too old t' be of any help. He can't run it alone, an' seems t' me it's a good thing for both of 'em."

"That's just it!" Susan Hornby broke out, turning back, her eyes following the progress of the pair toward the crimson west, her thoughts running ahead to the unknown future where the progress of the soul would be helped or hindered; "that's just it! He has a farm; now he's going to need a wife to help run it—just as he needs a horse. If he'd only be fair about it, but he's misleading her. She thinks he'll always do things the way he's doing them now, and he won't; there'll be an end to that kind of thing some day—and—and when they're married and he's got her fast, that kind of man won't be nice about it—and—they'll live on the farm—and life's so hard sometimes! Oh! I can't bear to see her broken to it!" she cried with such intensity that the man at her side caught his breath with a sort of sob.

"Anybody'd think to hear you talk, Susan, that marryin' was a thing to be feared, an' that I'd been mean t' you."

What had she done? There was a half-frightened pause as Susan Hornby struggled to bring herself back to the husband standing beside her who was broken by failure.

"Bless your old soul, Nate," she answered quickly, and with the flush of confusion on her face strangely like the flush of guilt, "if he's only half as good to her as you've been to me, She'll never have anything to complain of nor need anybody's sympathy."

Susan understood that her assurance did not wholly reassure that bleeding heart, and to turn Nathan's thoughts to other things she slipped one hand through his arm, and picking up the milk pails from the bench at her side with the other, said with a little laugh:

"There now! I'll do your milking for that. You throw down the hay while I do it. There's nothing the matter with you and me, except that I've done a washing to-day and you don't sleep well of late. I haven't one thing in all this world to complain of, and this would be the happiest year of my life if you weren't a bit gloomy and under the weather. Come on—I'm nervous. You know I never am well in hot weather."

Nathan knew that Susan was really worried over Elizabeth's prospects, but her luckless remark upon the marriage of farmers cut into his raw, quivering consciousness of personal failure like a saw-bladed knife, torturing the flesh as it went. His failure to place her where her own natural characteristics and attainments deserved had eaten into his mind like acid. In proportion as he loved her and acknowledged her worth he was humiliated by the fact that she was not getting all out of life of which she was capable, as his wife, and it left him sensitive regarding her possible estimate of it.

"She always seems satisfied," he said to himself as he turned his pitchfork to get a hold on the pile into which he had thrust it, "but here she is pityin' this here girl that's goin' t' be married as if she goin' t' be damned."

The Adam's apple in his wrinkled throat tightened threateningly, and to keep down any unmanly weakness it indicated he fell upon the hay savagely, but the suspicion stayed with him and left its bitter sting.

CHAPTER VI

"DIDN'T TAKE 'EM LONG"

John Hunter and Elizabeth Farnshaw rode away in the cool summer evening, wholly unconscious of the thoughts of others. The sun had dropped behind the low hills in front of them, and as they rode along, the light-floating clouds were dyed blazing tints of red and gold, as glowing and rosy as life itself appeared to the young pair. Elizabeth took off her hat and let the cool evening breeze blow through the waves of hair on her temples and about the smooth braids which, because of the heat of the prematurely hot summer day, had been wound about her head. Her eyes were dreamy and her manner detached as she let the pony wander a half length ahead of its companion, and she was unaware that John was not talking. She was just drinking in the freshness of the evening breeze and sky, scarcely conscious of any of her surroundings, glad as a kitten to be alive, and as unaware of self as a young animal should be.

John Hunter rode at her side, watching the soft curls on her round girlish neck, athrob and athrill with her presence, and trying to formulate the thing he had brought her out to say. It was not till they were turning into the lane beside the new house that his companion realized that he had been more than usually quiet. 132

“You are a Quaker to-night, evidently, and do not speak till the spirit moves, Mr. Hunter,” she said, facing about near the gateway and waiting for him to ride alongside.

The young man caught the cue. “I wish you would call me John. I’ve been intending to ask you for some time. I have a given name,” he added.

“Will you do the same?” she asked.

“Call myself John?” he replied.

They both laughed as if a great witticism had been perpetrated.

“No, call me by my given name.”

“Lizzie, Bess, Elizabeth, or Sis?” he asked, remembering the various nicknames of her family.

“You may call me whatever you choose,” she answered, drawing the pony up where they were to dismount.

John Hunter stepped to the ground and with his bridle rein over his arm came around to the left side of her pony. Laying one hand on its neck and the other on the hand that grasped its bridle, he looked up into her face earnestly and said:

“I would like to call you ‘Wife,’ if I may, Elizabeth,” and held up his arms quickly to help her from the saddle.

When she was on the ground before him he barred her way and stood, pulsing and insistent, waiting for her answer.

It was a full minute before either moved, she looking down at their feet, he looking at her and trying to be sure he could push his claims. 133

When Elizabeth did look up it was with her eyes brimming shyly over with happy tears, and without waiting for her answer in words, John Hunter gathered her into his arms and smothered her face in kisses.

Ten minutes later they tied the horses to the new hitching post and passed into the yard.

“It is to be your house and mine, dearie,” the young man said, and then looked down at her to see why she did not answer.

Elizabeth was walking toward the house which was to be hers, oblivious of time and place, almost unconscious of the man at her side, stunned by the unexpectedness of this precious gift of love which had just been offered her. As they stepped upon the little back porch, he said:

“I brought you over to ask your advice about the stairway; the carpenters want to leave one step in the sitting room. It’ll be back far enough from the chimney to be out of the way and it makes their calculations easier about the stairs somehow. What do you think?”

Elizabeth was altogether too new in the sense of possession to grasp the full significance of the question. John Hunter laughed at the look she turned upon him and said, with a large and benevolent wave of the hand, indicating the entire premises:

“The house is yours, little girl, and you are to have it as you want it. The only desire I have on earth is to do things for you.” 134

Elizabeth shot a quick look of joy up to him. “No one but Aunt Susan has ever wanted to do anything for me,” she said, and opening her arms held them out to him, crying, “Am I to be happy? John! John! do you love me, really?”

And that was the burden of their conversation during the entire stay.

“It can’t be possible, John,” the happy girl said at one point. “I have never known love—and—and I want it till I could die for it.”

“Just so you don’t die *of* it, You’ll be all right,” John Hunter replied, and went home from Nathan’s, later, whistling a merry tune. He had not known that love poured itself out with such abandonment. It was a new feature of the little god’s manoeuvring, but John doubted not that it was the usual thing where a girl really cared for a man.

“I’ll farm the whole place next year, and It’ll be different from boarding at the Chamberlains’,

where they don't have any napkins and the old man sucks his coffee out of his saucer as if it hurt him. Mother 'll like her too, after we get her away from that sort of thing and brush her up, and get her into the Hunter ways," he told himself as he tied the pony in the dark stall.

The next day was a dream to the young girl, who patiently watched the clock and waited for the hour of visiting the new house again. "I have no higher desire on earth than to do things for you," was the undercurrent of her thoughts. She was to escape from the things which 135
threatened at home. Instead of always rendering services, which were seldom satisfactory after she had sacrificed herself to them, she was to be served as well. Oh, the glad thought! Not of service as such, but of the mutuality of it. She loved John Hunter and he loved her. There was to be understanding between them. That was the joy of it. To put her hand on the arm of one that appreciated not only her but all that she aimed at, to open her heart to him, to be one with him in aspiration, that was the point of value which Elizabeth Farnshaw never doubted was to be the leading characteristic of their life together.

Now that she was engaged, Elizabeth felt herself emancipated from home authority. She would belong to herself hereafter. She would stay with Aunt Susan till she had her sewing done for the winter at Topeka. She would go to school only one year, just enough to polish up on social ideas and matters of dress. Elizabeth Farnshaw knew that both John Hunter and his mother were critical upon those accomplishments and her pride told her to prepare for the mother's inspection. She knew that she was considered a country girl by those of superior advantages, and she was resolved to show what could be done in a year in the way of improvement; then she would come home and teach for money with which to buy her wedding outfit, and then they would be married. Two years and the certainty of graduation would have suited her better, but two years was a long time. The picture of John without her, and the home he was building for her, planted themselves in the foreground of her thoughts, and Elizabeth was unselfish. She 136
would not make John Hunter wait. She would make that one year at Topeka equal to two in the intensity of its living. She would remain away the shortest possible length of time which was required for her preparation. Elizabeth was glad that John had his mother to keep house for him, because she did not want him to be lonesome while she was gone, though she did not doubt that he would come to Topeka many times while she was there. Her mind flew off in another direction at that, and she planned to send him word when there were good lectures to attend.

"John likes those things," she thought, and was filled with a new joy at the prospect of their books, and lectures, and intellectual pursuits. Her plan of teaching in the high school was abandoned. It was better to be loved and have a home with John Hunter than to live in Topeka. The more Elizabeth thought of it the more she was convinced that her plan was complete. She was glad there was a month to spare before Mrs. Hunter came. John's mother was the only warning finger on Elizabeth's horizon. She had always been conscious of a note of anxiety in John Hunter's voice and manner whenever he spoke of his mother coming to Kansas to live, and she found the anxiety had been transferred to her own mind when she began to consider her advent into the home John was building. She had gathered, more from his manner than anything definitely said, that his mother would not approve of much that she would be obliged to meet in the society about them, that she was a social arbiter in a class of women superior to these 137
simple farmers' wives, and that her whole life and thought were of a different and more desirable sort. When Elizabeth thought of Mrs. Hunter she unconsciously glanced down at herself, her simple print dress, her brown hands, and the heavy shoes which much walking made necessary, and wondered how she did really appear; and there was a distinct misgiving in everything where the older woman had to be considered.

John came early that evening. The carpenters had raised new questions about shelves and doors and Elizabeth must go over and decide those matters. They walked over, and it was late before all the simple arrangements could be decided upon. As they returned they walked close together in the centre of the deep road so as to avoid the dew-laden grass on either side. The open door of Nathan's house gave out a hospitable light, but they were content to saunter slowly, listening to the harvest crickets which were already chirruping in the weeds about them, and looking at the lazy red disk of the moon just peeping above the eastern horizon.

"I shall write mother of our engagement to-night," John said after a rather long silence.

"Oh, don't," the girl replied, awakened suddenly from a reverie of a different sort. "Let's keep it a secret for a while. I haven't told Aunt Susan yet, and I don't want to tell her till I go to Topeka. Of course I'll have to explain if you come down there to see me."

"To Topeka?" John exclaimed in astonishment. 138

Elizabeth laughed merrily. "Why, yes," she said. "Isn't it like me to think you knew all about that? I'm going to Topeka to school this winter—and—and I hope You'll come a lot. We'll have awfully good times. Then I'll teach another term and get my wedding clothes and get them made, and then, John Hunter, I am yours to have and to hold," she ended happily.

"You don't mean that you are going to school again now that you are going to get married?" John Hunter asked with such incredulity that Elizabeth laughed a little joyous laugh full of girlish amusement, full of love and anticipation.

"Why of course—why not? All the more because we are going to be married. I'll want to brush up on lots of things before I have to live near your mother; and—and we'll have awfully good times when you come to see me."

"Oh, goodness!" John said irritably. "I'd counted on being married this fall. I simply can't wait

two years, and that is all there is about it." Elizabeth argued easily at first, certain that it could be readily arranged, but John became more and more positive. At last she became worried.

The harvest crickets were forgotten as the young girl pressed closer to his side, explaining the necessity, pointing out that it was to be her last little fling at the education for which she had planned so long, her timidity where his mother was concerned, and her desire to enter the family upon equal social terms.

"It is all tomfoolery," John answered with fixity of purpose. "You don't need a thing that you haven't already got—except," he added slowly, "except what mother could help you to. But that isn't the point. I shall need you. It's time for me to get down to business and raise some money. Between building the house and going"—John hesitated—"and not applying myself as I should, I'm not making anything this summer. I want to get away from this—from here—some day, and I want to begin real work at once. Mother can help you in anything you don't know; she's up on all those things; and we've got to get down to business," he repeated. 139

There was a tone of finality in it. Elizabeth recognized it, but her plans were made and she was not ready to give them up.

"I can't go into your house, John, I simply cannot, without getting away and learning some things. When I become your wife I want to be a woman you are proud to take to your mother. I can't have it otherwise."

There was quiet while she waited for the answer to her assertion. Elizabeth thought he was formulating a reply. The silence lengthened, and still she waited. They were getting nearer the house and she moved more slowly, drawing on his arm to check his advance. At last, realizing that he did not intend to speak when they were just outside of the lighted doorstep, Elizabeth stopped and, facing around so that she could see him in the dim light, asked:

"What is it? What have I done to offend you?"

"Nothing, only it upsets every plan I have on earth. I tell you, it's all foolishness; and besides, I need you. Now see here"—and he went on to show her how his mother knew all the things she was going to Topeka to learn, and to outline his schemes for the future. 140

Confused by his opposition, and not knowing just how to meet this first difference of opinion, Elizabeth listened and made no reply. It was her way to wait when disturbed until she saw her way clear. Elizabeth was sound and sturdy but not quick and resourceful when attacked. John talked on till he had finished his argument and then turned to the house again. When they arrived at the step he said a whispered good-bye and was gone before Elizabeth realized that he was not coming in with her.

Susan Hornby had risen from her chair, thinking that John was coming into the house, and when she saw that he did not she slipped her arm about the young girl and kissed her as she was passing.

"I'm going to bed, Aunt Susan," Elizabeth said, and passed on to the door of her own room. Susan Hornby knew that something had gone wrong.

Saturday morning was spent by Elizabeth sewing on a dress she was anxious to finish before Mrs. Hunter came, and when there were only mornings and evenings in which to sew, and inexperience made much ripping necessary, the work did not progress rapidly. As she sewed she considered. No, she would not give up the year away at school. It was absolutely essential that she come into the Hunter family equipped and ready to assume the rôle which a wife should play in it. She would be married without a whole new outfit of clothes, but the year at school was a necessity. Elizabeth's pride revolted against being taught social customs by John Hunter's mother. As she thought of the year he must spend alone, however, she was quite willing to give up teaching an extra year for the sake of the usual bridal finery. She resolved to tell him that. She would be married in the simplest thing she had if he wished. 141

Fate in the person of John Hunter himself took the settlement of the bride's gown out of Elizabeth's hands. Just before noon he stopped, on his way back from Colebyville, to give Susan Hornby the mail he had brought out from the post-office. Elizabeth followed him to the wagon when he went out.

"Well, I wrote mother. Can you be ready by October?" He spoke across the backs of the horses as he untied them, and was very busy with the straps.

Elizabeth Farnshaw's face contracted visibly. He had taken advantage of her.

"How could you do it?" she asked indignantly.

"Why, I thought it was settled! I told you I couldn't wait a whole year, much less two. I told you about getting Mitchell County land and getting down to cattle raising right off. You didn't say anything."

There was such righteous innocence in his voice that the sting of deception was drawn from her mind. The young girl made no reply, but leaned her head against the withers of the horse at her side and looked down at her foot to hide her tears. It was a blow. She was conscious that somehow there had been a lack of high principle in it. Her silence the night before *had* given some colour to the claim of it having been settled, but there had been a haste about this letter which was suspicious. Why could he not have stopped on the way to town as well as now on the way home? 142

The question which was forming in Elizabeth's mind was cut short by feeling John's arm stealing

around her. She started and glanced at the house apprehensively.

“Oh, they can’t see us,” John said, glad to have that phase of the situation up for argument. “It wouldn’t matter if they did, since we are to be married so soon.” He added the last warily and watched to see its effect upon her.

“But I didn’t want it to be as soon as that,” the girl objected half-heartedly, making her usual mistake of laying the vital point of difference away to be settled in her own mind before she discussed it. Perhaps after all John had thought it was settled the night before; at any rate she would not speak of her suspicion till sure on that point.

John Hunter noticed that she did not refuse outright to consent to the early marriage and drew her complacently to him.

“I couldn’t wait that long, sweet. I want you and I want you now.”

He drew her close, in a firm, insistent grasp of his strong arm. Her resistance began to melt.

“I love you,” his voice said close to her ear. She felt his eyes seeking hers. His was the position of advantage. Elizabeth loved love, and she had never had it before. She had never been wanted for love’s sake. She wished to believe him. It came over her that she had wronged him by even the thought of an advantage having been taken of her. John’s arm was about her, he was pleading his love. Why be unpleasant about it? It was only a little thing. As she had said in her engagement hour, Elizabeth wanted love till she could die for it. She gave up, though something in her held back and was left hungry.

As John Hunter drove home to Liza Ann’s waiting dinner he said to himself:

“Gosh! but I’m glad I got that letter off. I knew I’d better do it this morning or she’d be hanging back. It worked better than I had any reason to expect. She’s going to be easy to manage. Mother ain’t able to cook for hired men. She’s never had it to do—and she don’t have to begin. This school business is all foolishness, anyhow.”

Elizabeth did not stand as usual and watch her lover drive toward home. Something in her wanted to run away, to cry out, to forget. She was torn by some indefinable thing; her confidence had received a shock. She went back to the house, but to sew was impossible now. She decided to go home, to walk. The long stretches of country road would give time and isolation in which to think. She announced her determination briefly as she passed through the kitchen, oblivious of Aunt Susan’s questioning eyes. Snatching up the large sunbonnet which was supposed to protect her from the browning effects of Kansas winds and sun, she told the older woman, who made no effort to disguise her astonishment at the sudden change, to tell John to come for her on the morrow, and set off toward the north.

Elizabeth knew that her father’s temper made her homegoing an unsafe procedure, but the tumult within her demanded that she get away from Susan Hornby and think her own thoughts unobserved.

But though the walk gave her time to think, Elizabeth was no nearer a decision when she sighted the Farnshaw cottonwoods than she had been when she started out. The sun burned her shoulders where the calico dress was thin, and she wiped her perspiring face as she stopped determinedly to come to some conclusion before she should encounter her mother.

“I suppose I ought to give up to him,” she said, watching a furry-legged bumblebee as it moved about over the face of a yellow rosin weed flower by the roadside. “I wouldn’t care if it weren’t for his mother. I’d like to get some of these country ways worked out of me before I have to see too much of her. She’ll never feel the same toward me if she has to tell me what to do and what not to do. If only he didn’t want me so badly. If only I could have one year away.”

The new house pleaded for John Hunter, the content of a home, life with the young man himself. Elizabeth had reasoned away her distrust of the means by which her consent had been gained, but her heart clung to the desire to appear well before Mrs. Hunter. Something warned her that she must enter that house on an equal footing with the older woman.

“Well, he wants me, and I ought to be glad he is in a hurry. I’ll do it. I ought to have insisted last night if I meant to hold out, and not have let him misunderstand me. If it weren’t for his mother, I wouldn’t care.”

Having decided to accept the terms offered her, Elizabeth sat down in the shade of a clump of weeds and pictured, as she rested, the home which was to be hers. Compared to those of the farmers’ wives about them, it was to be sumptuous. She thought of its size, its arrangement, and the man who was inviting her to share it with him, and a glad little thrill ran through her. When Elizabeth began to sum up her blessings she began to be ashamed of having suspected John Hunter of duplicity in writing the letter.

“He told me he had no higher desires on earth than to do things for me,” she said, springing up and starting home with a song in her heart.

Mrs. Farnshaw, called to the door by the barking of the dogs, exclaimed:

“What in this world brings you home at this time of day?” Mrs. Farnshaw’s hands were covered with the dough of her belated Saturday’s baking.

“Just had to come, mummie; just had to come,” Elizabeth cried, giving her mother a rapturous little hug.

Mrs. Farnshaw ducked her head to avoid the manœuvre, saying petulantly:

“Look out! Can’t you see I’m in th’ flour up t’ my elbows.”

Elizabeth flicked her dress sleeve and laughed in merry derision.

“Kansas flour brushes off easily, ma,” she said, “and I’ve got something to tell you.”

The corners of Mrs. Farnshaw’s mouth twitched in a pleased effort to cover a smile.

Elizabeth was surprised at her own statement. She had not exactly intended to tell her mother at this time and could not understand herself in having put the idea forth, that she had come all the way home to tell something of importance. She sat down and leaned her elbows on the littered kitchen table too confused to speak for a moment. She had made the plunge; there was no other excuse for the trip that she could think of at that time, and, with a feeling that Aunt Susan had been defrauded of something distinctly belonging to her, Elizabeth broke the silence with the bald statement.

“Mr. Hunter and I are going to be married.”

“Well, Lizzie, that ain’t much news; we seen it comin’ weeks ago,” the mother replied with a laugh.

“You did? I don’t see how you knew,” the girl said, startled out of her confusion.

“What’s he been comin’ here so steady for?” Mrs. Farnshaw replied, scraping the side of her bread pan with a kitchen knife, and ready to enter into this delightful bit of argument. Lizzie was doing well for herself.

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“Lots of girls have steady company and don’t get married either,” the girl replied hesitantly.

“Oh, yes, but this is different,” the mother said. “When’s it goin’ t’ be?”

“Some time in October,” Elizabeth said, her words dragging. She had consented, but the mere mention of the time made her shrink.

“Is th’ house done?” Mrs. Farnshaw asked, her mind, like her hands, filled with practical concerns.

“Almost,” Elizabeth returned as she rose to get the broom with which to sweep the ever dusty floor. “It’s ready to paint,” she added.

“Is it goin’ t’ be painted? Will it be white and have green shutters?”

Elizabeth laughed at the gratified pride in her mother’s tone.

“I don’t know, ma,” she said, looking for the shovel, which, when it could be located, served as a dustpan.

“Didn’t he ask you what colour to put on it?” the mother asked, fishing the shovel out of the rubbish collected behind the rusty cook stove. “Now look here, Lizzie,” she added with sudden suspicion, “don’t you go an’ spoil him right t’ begin with. You let him see that you want things your own way about th’ house. If you set your foot down now, You’ll have it easier all th’ way through. That’s where I made my mistake. I liked t’ give up t’ your pa at first an’ then—an’ then he got t’ thinkin’ I didn’t have no right t’ want anything my way.”

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Mrs. Farnshaw filled the hungry stove with cobs and studied the subject dejectedly.

“I don’t get my way about nothin’. I can’t go t’ town t’ pick out a new dress that is bought with money I get from th’ eggs, even. He’ll manage most any way t’ get off t’ town so’s t’ keep me from knowin’ he’s goin’, an’ then make me send th’ eggs an’ butter by some one that’s goin’ by. He makes me stay home t’ watch something if he has t’ let me know he’s goin’ his self. I don’t own my house, nor my children, nor myself.”

The undercurrent of Elizabeth’s thoughts as she listened to the spiritless tale was, “but John’s so different from pa.”

“I reckon I’ll never have no help from you now,” Mrs. Farnshaw continued in the same whine.

The girl crossed the room and put her arms tenderly around her mother’s neck.

“I’ll live real near you, ma, and you can come and see me every few days. Don’t let’s spoil these last few weeks by worrying,” Elizabeth said, her eyes opened to the longing expressed.

Mrs. Farnshaw was heating the oven for baking, and broke away from the sympathetic clasp to refill the roaring stove.

“These cobs don’t last a minute,” she said, and then turned to Elizabeth again. “You’ll have th’ nicest house in th’ country. My! won’t it make th’ Cranes jealous?”

“They don’t count,” Elizabeth answered. “I believe you think more of John’s house than you do of him.”

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“No, I don’t, but I’m glad t’ see you doin’ so well for yourself.”

As she finished speaking, Mr. Farnshaw came into the kitchen.

“Well, pa, how do you do?” Elizabeth said, turning toward him pleasantly. She wanted to tell him of her engagement, now that she had told her mother, and she wanted to be at peace with him.

Mr. Farnshaw mumbled a curt reply and, picking up the empty basket standing beside the stove, went out of the house, slamming the door behind him significantly.

“I wanted to tell him myself,” Elizabeth said with a half-shamed look in her mother’s direction.

“I’m glad all men aren’t like that.”

“Well, he remembers that awful thing you said about partin’——” Mrs. Farnshaw began.

“But this isn’t any new thing in him, ma. He’s always been that way,” Elizabeth objected, determined not to let her mother start on that subject to-day.

“Oh, I know it! They all get that way if they’re let; think they own everything in sight. They get worse, too, as they get older. You do what I said an’ set your foot down about that house,” her mother replied, and turned to put a pan of bread in the oven.

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CHAPTER VII

ERASING HER BLACKBOARD

John’s attention centred about the new house and each day found him more impatient to see it finished. The creature comforts of life were his main ideals and he wanted to get settled. Sunday afternoon found him early at Nathan’s to consult with Elizabeth about the kitchen windows. Susan Hornby’s surprised recognition of his annoyance, when he was told that she had gone home, added to the unpleasantness of the eight-mile drive. What business had that woman studying him or his moods? he asked himself as he drove away. He would not get out of the wagon when he reached Elizabeth’s home, though the sun was hot and Mrs. Farnshaw urged him to do so. He was irritated, he did not know at what, but he was. He hurried Elizabeth away without ceremony. As soon as they were beyond earshot he began to voice his grievances. The point he discussed had nothing whatever to do with the real ground for his irritability, but served as an outlet for his acrid frame of mind.

“If you want to go anywhere, let me know it so that I can take you. I can’t have you running around the country in this fashion,” he began.

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Elizabeth, who had felt his manner, looked up in puzzled surprise. She could see nothing in that to be fretted about. It was so good to see him, to have him with her again after a night spent in her father’s house, that she was ready to concede any point her lover might raise, but this seemed so trivial that she laughed a happy laugh as she answered caressingly:

“I have always walked whenever and wherever I chose around here. I like it, dear.”

“That don’t make any difference; it ain’t good for any woman to walk eight miles at one time,” John answered shortly.

Unable to see the reason for laying stress upon the danger in doing a thing she had done for years without harm to herself, Elizabeth was surprised into continuing the argument without at all caring whether she ever walked again or not.

“I’ve walked that much a hundred times in my life, and I’ll probably walk it a hundred times more,” she replied with a laugh.

“Not if you live with me,” John Hunter announced, standing as solid as a rock on the issue now that he had raised it.

“But why not?” the girl inquired, still but little concerned, and looking her betrothed over with a girl’s eye for correct combinations of collar, tie, and driving gloves. Those gloves had been the chief objection Elizabeth’s brothers had been able to raise against the Eastern man, and gave colour to the spiteful “dude” with which John Hunter was mentioned by the envious.

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“Why not?” John repeated after her. “Because it don’t look well.”

The ridiculous and inadequate reply drew the girl still deeper into the discussion. She began to reason with him quite earnestly. She had always walked a great deal; she loved it. Walking was jolly fun. Everybody knew she was not as dependent upon being taken as the ordinary woman. When, however, John would not give in and insisted that things were different now that they were engaged, she ceased to say more.

“You see,” he concluded, “people expect me to take you. They’ll think something’s happened and that I don’t want to. If I want to take my future wife, she ought to be willing to be taken. I don’t want you ever to walk home again.”

Elizabeth Farnshaw was young, the experiences of her night at home had made her covet peace, she was unaware that she was being moulded, or that her lover considered the Hunter ways, as such, especially desirable. Willing to pay the price, rather enjoying the masterful way in which her betrothed insisted upon serving her, reflecting that no one had ever been willing to serve her at all, and feeling that it was a minor matter, she gave up.

“All right! I like to walk, but if you look at it in that way I won’t do it again,” she promised, and in the silence which followed stole a look now and then at John Hunter, revelling in his well-groomed appearance. A vision of her father’s slatternly, one-suspendered shoulders, and button-less sleeves flapping about his rough brown wrists, set against this well-shirted gentleman

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produced sharp contrast and made of the future a thing altogether desirable. The useless arguments between her parents arose before her also; she resolved to argue less and love more. It was something, she reflected, to know when to lay an argument down. Besides, John wanted it. Leaning over, she rubbed her cheek softly against his sleeve.

“I never thought I could be so happy.” The words were whispered tenderly, as she looked up into his face.

Could mortal man fail to appreciate the manner of the surrender? There was nothing left to argue about; all had been granted. Elizabeth was learning, as all women have had to do before her, that the man-creature loves to be adored, that by cloaking her own desires, stroking his fur the right way, giving it little pats of approval and admitting the pleasure conferred by his presence, she could work a magic. John’s arm dropped about her and she gave herself up to the delights of being cuddled.

It was not possible for the inexperienced girl to measure the importance of the freedom she had surrendered. Elizabeth desired to forget the unpleasant things. Real issues were obscured for the girl by her desire to escape from her father’s house. In addition to that, Elizabeth had not yet become analytical. Instead of meditating upon the manner or the positiveness of her lover’s commands, she took counsel with herself how to make their lives different from her parents’, and in her efforts to keep her own attitude right forgot to see to it that there was a similar attitude on the part of her future husband.

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As they drove along with John’s arm about her they ceased to talk, and Elizabeth’s thoughts drifted off to her affairs with her father and the night just spent at home. Mr. Farnshaw had adopted the policy of contemptuous silence toward her, and Elizabeth hoped devoutly that he would continue in that frame of mind. Only so would she dare to spend at home the weeks between the close of school and her marriage. She had counted much upon spending those weeks with Aunt Susan, who daily became dearer. She was not moved to tell Aunt Susan girlish secrets, but she was understood and rightly valued in Susan Hornby’s home; and now, during this one of all the critical periods in her life the most important, Elizabeth desired to be with her, but Mrs. Farnshaw demanded uncompromisingly that her daughter come home at that time. There was no escaping Mrs. Farnshaw’s demands on her children, and, troubled and uncertain, Elizabeth pondered and snuggled closer to the man who was to deliver her from them.

The pair drove to the new house before going to the Hornbys’ for the rest of the day. John ceased to be fretful, and by the time for leaving had arrived, Elizabeth had forgotten that he had ever been so. That evening Aunt Susan was told of the engagement, and having divined its arrival, she was able to hide any misgivings she had about it. Besides, not having anything upon which to fasten her objections to John Hunter, she was wise enough to know that love must have its way, and when Elizabeth pictured the life that awaited her, her lover’s good points, and her satisfaction rang out in a song of glad notes with no hint of apprehension, the older woman tried to enter into the spirit of the hour.

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Elizabeth was certain she could meet John Hunter’s moods as the occasion required. No doubts assailed her about the future life except where John’s mother was concerned. When Elizabeth got to that point in her reflections she stopped short without speaking of the matter and announced her intention of going to bed. Elizabeth Farnshaw loved John Hunter devotedly, but his mother was another matter. There was a strong undercurrent of anxiety whenever Mrs. Hunter had to be considered. The nearer the time came for her arrival, the more the girl dreaded meeting her. Elizabeth was loyal to John, however, and Susan Hornby was given no hint of that dread.

Mrs. Hunter came west the last week of school, and when John was so busy getting her and her household goods settled that Elizabeth did not see him the entire week, it was like a stab to the sensitive girl. Filled with a natural sense of good-byes to all that she had known and loved in the work, the impending changes in her life took on a troubled air when John failed to come as usual and did not account for the delay. By some psychological process Susan Hornby’s misgivings began to be transferred to Elizabeth’s mind. Always as they sewed together Elizabeth was tempted to talk about the subject, but something held her back. Often Susan Hornby, who suspected her troubled state of mind, was moved to ask questions and could not.

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A week is a long time when anxiety governs the thoughts, and as Elizabeth grew more lonely she crept into Aunt Susan’s arms as well as into her heart. It became her custom to creep up to the older woman after the lamps were lighted and lay her head in her lap, while she would imprison one of Aunt Susan’s hands so as to be able to fondle it. The evidences of affection became more and more a part of her thoughts now that the days were slipping by without receiving those evidences from the one who had educated her in them.

The last day of school arrived. John had told Elizabeth the week before that he expected to take her and her trunk home, but not having seen him nor had a word from him recently regarding the matter, a strange feeling of disaster made the closing school exercises unreal and uninteresting. After the children were gone, Elizabeth began the task of cleaning the schoolroom and putting it in order. She set about the work slowly, making it last as long as she could. School teaching had been pleasant work. It had been the one free field of action life had ever granted her, the one point where she had ever possessed herself and moved unquestioned. The presence of John Hunter’s mother in the community had made the teaching seem a refuge to the young girl who was to live in the house with her. Elizabeth had not understood that Mrs. Hunter was actually to live with them till a short time before her arrival, and then had very

nearly given offence to her lover by an astonished exclamation of surprise. Perceiving that she had done so she hastened to say that she would be very glad to have his mother with them. As soon as Elizabeth had got away, and taken time to think it out, she saw that she had lied. John also knew that it was not exactly true, and was therefore more sensitive. It had been the first point of real difference between them. There had been no discussion of it. Elizabeth would have been glad to go to him and say that she wished it, but she did not wish it and would not lie consciously. If it had to be, she would make the best of it and make his mother as welcome as she could, but with the instincts of all young things, the girl wanted to live alone with her mate. The unnaturalness of having others thrust upon them during that first year of married life jarred upon her, just as it has jarred upon every bride who has been compelled to endure it since the beginning of time. It made of the new home a workshop instead of a nest, and took from the glamour of marriage. It made the girl cling to the freedom of the country schoolhouse and fear the new life, where the examples presented to her by those who had tried it were discouraging to an observant onlooker. All this came up as she worked, and saddened the day even more than before. As she put the broom away in the corner beside the water pail, she noticed that the blackboard remained to be cleaned. Taking an eraser she rubbed vigorously.

“It is a rat. Run, rat, run,” begun as high as little arms could reach, and straggling zigzagingly down toward the bottom, was the last to be attacked. As her hand passed reluctantly over it she said aloud:

“I’m erasing my blackboard too. Pretty soon I won’t be a girl any more. Pretty soon——”

She checked herself, and putting away the eraser, packed the few belongings in the drawer of the desk into a neat bundle to be carried home. With the package under her arm and her little tin dinner pail dangling from her wrist, Elizabeth fitted the key into the lock. As it clicked under her fingers the thought came to her that she must turn it over to the school board. The finality of it clutched her. Thrusting the key back into the door, she was about to go into the little room again for another look around, when Susan Hornby’s voice at her elbow made her start.

Aunt Susan saw the tears which had sprung into the young eyes at the leave-taking and drew her down on the step.

“What is it?” she asked earnestly. “You ought to tell me if you are worried.”

The tears which had been gathering spilled themselves over cheek and chin.

“Will I get like the rest of them, Aunt Susan?—never go anywhere, never read anything, have nothing ahead but the same weary round over again every day?” she queried, when she was able to command her voice.

Susan Hornby’s face worked determinedly to control her own emotions for a moment before she could speak.

Elizabeth continued: “I’ve been—I’ve been so happy this summer, Aunt Susan, and—and I’m a little afraid of that other life. Don’t think I don’t want to be married—I do,” she felt bound to interpose. “It’s just—just that—well, you can see how it is; the married women around here wear faded things, and—and their teeth get bad—and a man hardly ever wants to take his wife anywhere. Look at Mrs. Carter, and Mrs. Crane, and ma. Poor ma! She never gets to go anywhere she wants to.”

The girlish questionings and fears broke down Susan Hornby’s control and she fell on Elizabeth’s neck and sobbed openly as she said:

“I know, I know. I’ve thought of little else of late. My poor little ewe lamb! My poor little ewe lamb!”

The ethics of Susan Hornby’s generation did not permit of an outright discussion of the marriage relation. She did not have the matter clear in her own mind, but a sort of dull terror came over her whenever she thought of Elizabeth becoming John Hunter’s wife. She could hardly have told why. She knew that somehow human beings missed the highest in the marriage relation and that the undiscussed things of life had to do with the failure; she knew also that her instincts regarding this marriage were true, but she could sound no warning because her knowledge came from the instincts and had no outward evidence of fact with which to support it. To how large a degree did these warnings apply to all? Susan Hornby had plenty of time to wonder and think, for Elizabeth cried softly to herself without speaking further. The older woman’s hand wandered over the glossy braids in her lap, and her eyes wandered off toward the Carter homestead while her mind struggled with the problems of the neighbourhood. Elizabeth had put into words a thing she had herself observed. She saw the irritability of men toward their wives; she saw women about them who toiled earnestly, who bore children, and who denied themselves every sort of pleasurable relation at the demand of husbands who never gave them a look of comradery or good fellowship in return. Was it the weariness of the struggle to live, or was it sex, or was it the evil domination of men? This girl whose sunny hair she was caressing was to go under the merciless hammer of the matrimonial auctioneer. What was to be her fate? Susan Hornby saw that love had touched the highest in Elizabeth Farnshaw’s nature and that the girl yearned toward a high ideal of family life. She had shown it in her girlish chatter as they had sewed together. Could she attain to it? Susan Hornby thought of John Hunter and stiffened. She felt that Elizabeth would yearn toward it all the days of her life with him and never catch even a fleeting glimpse of it.

Elizabeth snuggled closer on the step and reached for the hand stroking her head.

“It isn’t the faded dresses, Aunt Susan; it’s—it’s the faded life I’m afraid of,” she whispered

thickly.

Susan Hornby bent her head to catch the sobbing voice, and losing control of her reserve, said abruptly: “I know it, I know all about it. If I thought John Hunter’d let you set at home like——”

She knew while the words were still in her mouth that it was a mistake. The girl shrank away and dropped the hand she had been fondling. There was absolute silence for a moment, the older woman dumb, unable to go on, unable to explain, unable to retract, or extricate herself in any way. The discussion had promised so well at first that both had entered into it with zest, and yet the moment it had become personal, loyalty had risen between them and hushed their words and left them uncomfortable. The silence became so intolerable that Elizabeth arose, and unable to look up turned and fumbled with the lock on the schoolhouse door. Aunt Susan rose also and waited, without speaking, for her to start home. Something hurt on both sides. Neither blamed the other, but both were to look back to the rough schoolhouse steps and the half-hearted discussion of man’s domination and woman’s inability to defend herself against it.

Before supper was quite finished John came to take Elizabeth to meet his mother. He was all bustle and activity; in fact, John Hunter was at his best. He took possession of her in exactly the way to show how unnecessary her fears had been. The reaction set in. John was fresh and clean of linen and finger-nails and pleasing to the eye. Elizabeth’s mood changed the moment he presented himself on Nathan’s doorstep. Every fear of the faded life disappeared in his magical presence. John Hunter at least was not faded. After all, Elizabeth had been a bit piqued and really wanted to meet Mrs. Hunter. John whisked her off merrily and carried her to the home which was to be theirs.

“Mother, this is Elizabeth Farnshaw, soon to be your daughter,” was the introduction he gave her when his mother met them at the door, and then watched narrowly to see what sort of impression Elizabeth would make.

Mrs. Hunter kissed the girl gravely, and still retaining her hand stepped back and looked at her curiously, but kindly.

“I am glad you are to be John’s wife, dear,” she said slowly. “I am sure we shall like each other. We must—he is all I have, you know.”

Elizabeth, who had felt herself on trial, was near tears, but her lover saved her from that embarrassment when, feeling that the Hunter approval was accorded, he stepped forward and put his arms about the two, kissing first one and then the other.

“My mother and my wife-to-be must certainly like each other,” he said.

They passed into the house, over which John and his mother conducted Elizabeth, talking of its arrangement and furnishings. The girl had supposed that she had a fairly definite idea of the appearance that house would have, having overseen every feature of its building, but it was a world of surprises she entered upon to-day. In her wildest dreams of what they would do when they had become rich, as they had planned much to do, this daughter of the Kansas prairies had never pictured such tasteful home-making. Each bedroom had its bureau with bedstead to match, and the one downstairs had ruffled pillow-shams.

“This is to be your own room,” Mrs. Hunter whispered in Elizabeth’s ear, and the young girl stole a shy look at her lover, who was drumming on the window and had not heard, and made no reply, but it gave her a sense of possession in the new house which she had very nearly lost of late.

It was reserved for the new cook stove in the spotless kitchen to complete the surprises of Elizabeth’s new world. Elizabeth fingered the nickled knobs, exclaimed over the reservoir for hot water at its back and the warming closet below, and investigated all its secret places as if it had been a toy. John Hunter gave his mother an approving nod behind the girl’s back, and the visit was a success. Elizabeth forgot that she was to share the honours of the home with “Mother Hunter,” as she had secretly called her a few times, and in the end overstayed her time till the leave-taking at Aunt Susan’s had to be cut short, and they were late in arriving at her father’s house.

The day, which had had so many variations, however, like a piece of music, was to return to the original theme before it closed. It had been a day of forebodings and anxiety. Fate never permitted Elizabeth Farnshaw more than a short snatch at happiness, and as John Hunter drove away after he had helped her deposit her trunk in a dusty corner, the girl wanted to run after him and implore him not to leave her at the mercy of the morrow.

As she gazed about the cheerless kitchen she noticed a muffled lump in the middle of the table. The sponge for the Saturday’s baking had been warmly wrapped for the night. To-morrow would be bake day! Oh, joy! Elizabeth resolved to insist upon kneading the dough the next morning, and before starting up the ladder to the loft where she was to sleep she hunted around in the kitchen safe for the cook book, wondering if by any chance she could induce her mother to let her try her hand at baking a cake also.

“Go to bed, in there!” growled a voice from the other room, and the girl climbed to her pallet, on which dreams of cooking were to entertain her waking as well as her sleeping hours.

Elizabeth’s cooking schemes turned out rather better than she had expected. There are some things common to all women, and Mrs. Farnshaw entered into her daughter’s desire to learn to cater to the appetite of the man she was going to marry. She worked with the girl at the home-made kitchen table, and as they worked she talked of many things which to her mind were

essential to preparations for marriage, of the dresses to be made, of the new house, which was Mrs. Farnshaw's pride, and of John Hunter himself. By some unlucky chance Elizabeth mentioned her father's name. Mrs. Farnshaw had been waiting for an opportunity to speak of the misunderstanding between her husband and their daughter. It is the tendency of the weak to waste much time and energy in reconciliations, and to Mrs. Farnshaw peace meant far more than principles. She gave little thought to the rightness of her husband's demands, but bent every faculty toward coaxing her family to accede to them. If he were angry, all must move in cautious attempt to placate his temper, and if his feelings were hurt no principle must be 165
permitted to stand in the way of excuse and explanation. She was rejoiced when Elizabeth mentioned her father's name and forced upon her at once the necessity of asking pardon for the luckless remark regarding separation which Mr. Farnshaw had overheard three months before.

"But it isn't a particle of use, ma," Elizabeth replied when pushed to the point of answering. "You know he'll hate me now, no matter what I ever do. I've only got along peaceably this far by not talking to him of anything at all. It's his way. Let it alone. I'm sorry I ever said it, but it can't be helped."

"Yes, it can," Mrs. Farnshaw persisted. "Anyhow, he's your pa, an'—an'—an' you owe it t' him. You owe it t' me too, t' make it right. I'll never have a day of peace with him again if you don't. You'd no business t' talk of partin' nohow! 'Taint decent, an'—an' it give him th' feelin' that I was sidin' in with such talk."

Mrs. Farnshaw had been shrewd enough to save her strongest point till the last. That was the lever by which she could pry Elizabeth loose from her seated conviction that nothing could be done. Those sentiments had been *Elizabeth's*, not her mother's. Something was due the mother who had been compelled to share the blame for words as abhorrent to her as they were to the irate husband who supposed she had instigated them. Elizabeth knew that her mother would never have a day of peace with the man in any case, but she knew from her own experience with him that a remark such as she had made would be used to worry her mother and to stir even 166
more bitter accusations than usual. In her heart she knew that nothing she could say would change her father's feelings or alter his belief about the matter, but she did feel that her mother was justified from her own standpoint in making the demand. As she stirred the cake dough and pondered, she glanced across the table to the open door of her mother's scantily furnished bedroom opposite. A vision of ruffled pillow-shams where she was soon to sleep came to her in strong contrast. The memory of muffled sobs which she had heard coming from that poverty-stricken couch in the corner opposite the door was set over against the peaceful look of the room which was to be hers. She was going away to be happy: why not do this thing her mother asked before she went? Elizabeth knew that her attempt at reconciliation would be fruitless, but she resolved to do the best she could to leave all possible comfort to the mother whose portion was sorrow and bread eaten in bitterness and disappointment. She thought it out slowly. After pondering a long time, during which Mrs. Farnshaw studied her but did not speak, Elizabeth delivered her promise.

"I'll do the best I can, ma. I don't believe It'll do any good, but it isn't fair that you should suffer for a thing you hate as bad as he does. Don't let's talk about it, and let me find my own time to do it. I'll—I'll do my very best."

Pushing the cake-bowl away from her, she went around the table, and taking her mother's face between her hands she stroked the thin hair away from the wasted forehead, and kissed her 167
with a tenderness which brought a quiver to the unsatisfied lips.

"I'll do it as well as I possibly know how. I—I'm going away to be happy, and—and I want you to be happy too."

It was easier to say than to do, for things went wrong about the barn, and when supper time arrived Elizabeth decided to wait for a more propitious time.

In spite of her determination to get the disagreeable task behind her as soon as possible, Elizabeth could find no chance at the breakfast table the next morning to broach the subject, though she tried several times. Mrs. Farnshaw gave her warning looks, but it was clearly not the time. When at last the family was ready for divine services and Mr. Farnshaw drove up in front of the house with the lumber wagon, the mother gave Elizabeth a little push toward the door, admonishing her to "be quick about it. Now's your time."

Elizabeth went slowly out. Mr. Farnshaw had just jumped out of the wagon and when he saw his daughter coming stooped quickly to examine the leather shoe sole which served to protect the brake. The elaborate attempt to ignore her presence made the hard duty still harder. She waited for him to take cognizance of her presence, and to cover her confusion adjusted and readjusted a strap on Patsie's harness, thankful for the presence of her favourite.

"Let that harness alone!" her father commanded when he was at last embarrassed by his 168
prolonged inspection of the wagon-brake.

"All right, pa," Elizabeth replied, glad to have the silence broken in any manner. "I—I came out to talk to you. If I—if I've done anything to annoy you, ever, I want to ask your pardon. I—ma—I want to tell you that John Hunter and I are to be married this fall, and—and I'd like to be the kind of friends we ought to be before I go away."

The last sounded rather good to the girl and she stopped, encouraged, also feeling that it was best to let well enough alone; but when she looked up at him and encountered his look she shrank as if to avoid something aimed at her.

The tyrant detests anything which cringes before him, and Josiah Farnshaw was as much fired to anger by what he saw in his daughter's face as he could have been by her defiance.

"Oh, I know you'd like to be friends!" he sneered with the fierce hatred of a man caught in an evil act. "Now that you're goin' away you'd like t' be on good terms with me, would you? How many cows would you like for your peaceable intentions? What's th' price of your friendship, anyhow? Of course you don't owe me anything! You're a lady! Now that you're goin' t' set up housekeepin' you'd like t' be good friends. You'll get nothin' from me; I'll let you know that right here and now. Go along with you; I don't want nothin' from you, an' I don't propose t' give nothin' to you."

It was so coarse, so brutal, so untrue, that the girl met him once in his life as he deserved.

"Keep your cows," she said in the low tones of concentrated bitterness. "I don't want them, nor money from you. I don't owe you anything, either. I've done more work and furnished you more money than ever I cost you since the day I was born. I knew no one could explain anything to you. I told ma so, but she's afraid for her life of you, and insisted. I've tried to keep the peace with you, really, but no one ever has or ever will be able to do that. I'll let you alone after this."

"You damned huzzy!" the now thoroughly aroused man exclaimed, lunging forward to strike her with his open hand. He had only listened to her so far because there had been something so compelling in the rush of her words that he had been stupefied by astonishment into doing so.

Patsie, who was in line with the blow, reared and threw herself against her mate, knowing what that tone of her master's voice indicated, and his hands were so occupied for a few seconds in quieting the team that he could not follow his daughter and administer the chastisement he wished.

"I'll thrash you within an inch of your life!" he cried, however, when he saw her disappearing through the open door of the house.

"Now, and what have you done?" Mrs. Farnshaw demanded when the breathless girl pushed rapidly past her at the inner door and faced about defiantly in the middle of the kitchen.

"I don't want to hear another word about it, ever. I've done it about as bad as I could, I guess, but I'll never take another whipping from him, and you needn't expect it."

"I didn't mean it the way it sounded," she moaned after the family had gone, referring to the figurative speech, "She's afraid for her life of you." That had been meant in a very different sense. The girl would have given much to have unsaid it, to have given any sort of explanation.

It was not possible to explain anything to Josiah Farnshaw, and remembering the threat to flog her as soon as he returned from meeting, Elizabeth began to put up her hair and prepare for the departure which was her only way of escape. Josiah Farnshaw never forgot a promise of that sort.

"I'll go to Aunt Susan's," she resolved, and as soon as she could get her dress changed and a few things thrown quickly into the trunk which she had partially unpacked the day before, Elizabeth took her parasol and started toward the south. John lived in that direction also, and would be on his way to see her, for his mother had asked Elizabeth to spend the day with her. She would ask John to come for her trunk and then have him take her to Susan Hornby's house. Aunt Susan would welcome her with open arms. She was covered with perspiration when she met her lover, who was hot and uncomfortable also, and had been cursing every mile of the shadeless Kansas road. John's relief was so great at meeting her a couple of miles on the way that he did not inquire why she was there at that hour till she was seated beside him.

"But your father can't do anything to you," he objected when she had outlined her plan of going to Aunt Susan's to stay till the wedding. "Everybody knows that you have left there and You'll have to explain things and get into a scandal."

Without going into details, Elizabeth insisted that he drive on at once and get her trunk before her father and the family should get home from church.

John Hunter argued the matter.

"If you leave home," he said slowly, refusing to drive on, "people will talk, and it isn't to be considered."

There was a pause. Should she explain the case fully? It could not be done. John could not be made to understand. Elizabeth knew that even in the primitive community in which she had been brought up a man would be filled with disgust at the idea of striking a full-grown woman on any sort of provocation, and that a man reared as John Hunter had been reared would be alienated not only from her family but from her.

Caught like a rat in a trap, Elizabeth Farnshaw let her future husband study her curiously, while she deliberated and cast about for some means of getting his approval to her scheme without villifying her parents by telling the whole truth.

"I'll be nearer you, and Aunt Susan's always glad to have me," she said coaxingly.

It was a good bit of argument to put forth at that moment. The sun poured his heat out upon them in scalding fierceness, and John Hunter had cursed his luck every mile he had covered that morning. He had been accustomed to reach her in fifteen minutes, and the suggestion that she go back to the old place began to look more reasonable, yet he hesitated and was reluctant to let a breath of gossip touch his future wife. Whether Elizabeth were right or wrong did not enter into his calculations.

It looked as if his consent was not to be obtained. She could not go back.

“I’m not going home, and that is all that there is about it,” the girl announced in desperation.

John still hung back.

When he did not reply and it became necessary for her to go into the details she had been trying to avoid, it was done reluctantly and with as little emphasis put upon the possibility of physical chastisement as could be done and convince him at all. To Elizabeth’s surprise John did not take much notice of that element. It did not occur to her at that time that it was a strange thing that her lover should fail to be stirred by the probability of her receiving a blow. Elizabeth had never had consideration shown her by any one but Susan Hornby and had not yet learned to expect it. John struck the horses with the dangling lines he held and drove on toward the waiting trunk. She watched him as he rode by her side moodily thinking of the gossip threatened, and while it was not the mood she wished him to entertain, it did not occur to her that it was anything but a natural one. They rode without speaking until the house was reached.

“This’ll have to be explained to mother,” he remarked discontentedly as he shoved the unoffending trunk into the back of the wagon. Elizabeth made no reply. She had been thinking of that very thing.

VIII

CYCLONES

Susan Hornby asked no questions when Elizabeth and John presented themselves at her door. Their embarrassed faces warned her. She gathered Elizabeth into her arms for a brief hug, and then pushed her toward the inside of the house, remaining behind to show John where to put the trunk. When it had been set beside the kitchen door she dismissed him by saying:

“I won’t ask you to stay for a bite of dinner, since your mother is alone, Mr. Hunter.”

“Well—er—that is—mother expected Elizabeth over there,” John stammered, looking toward the front room.

“Tell your mother Elizabeth will stay right here till she has rested up from that headache,” the woman replied with the tone of having settled the matter.

Elizabeth, in the other room, noted that he did not argue about it and heard him drive away with mixed feelings. When at last Aunt Susan’s questions were answered the girl in turn became questioner.

“Will she think—John’s mother—that we’re coarse and common?” she asked when she had told as much as she could bring herself to tell of the morning’s altercation.

The look on the older woman’s face was not a hopeful one, and the girl got up restlessly from the trunk-top where she had dropped beside her. She remembered the fear, half expressed, on the schoolhouse steps two days before and drew within herself, sick with life.

“Can I put my trunk away?” she asked, to break the awkward silence she felt coming.

“Yes,” was the relieved answer, and each took a handle, carrying the light piece of baggage to the bedroom. At the door Elizabeth stopped short. A strange coat and vest were spread carelessly over the bed, and a razor strop lay across the back of the little rocking chair.

“Oh, I forgot!” Susan Hornby exclaimed, sweeping the offending male attire into her apron. “A young fellow stopped last night and asked to stay till he could get a house built on that land west of Hunter’s. You’re going to have a bachelor for a neighbour.”

“Who?” Elizabeth asked, and then added, “What will he do for a room if I take this one?”

“I don’t know,” Aunt Susan replied to the last clause of the question. “The room is yours, anyhow. I’m so glad to have you back that I’d turn him out if need be. Honestly, we could hardly eat Saturday. Nate was as bad as I was. They’ve gone to Colebyville together to-day. I’m glad Nate’s got him—he’s lonesome enough these days.”

It was Elizabeth’s turn to cheer up Aunt Susan, for she always fell into a gloom when she mentioned Nathan. It took Elizabeth’s mind from her own affairs, and by the time the unpacking was finished the volatile spirits of youth had asserted themselves. They took a walk toward evening, and only returned in time to meet John Hunter, who had come to see his betrothed about a trip he had decided suddenly to take to Mitchell County. He had spoken of it to Elizabeth before, and had only waited to get his mother established and a desirable hired man to run the place in his absence. The man had come that day asking for work and giving good references and John had decided to go at once.

In the excitement of preparation John seemed to have forgotten the discomforts of the morning, and though he soon took his departure, he left Elizabeth less unhappy than she had been.

Nathan and the new man were coming in the distance as John Hunter drove away, and the girl turned back into the kitchen to help with the supper.

“Lizzie Farnshaw! And you are the Elizabeth these folk have been talkin’ about? Well, I’ll be hornswoggled!”

Nathan and the new boarder had just come in.

“Is it really you, Luther?” Elizabeth asked, and there was no mistaking the glad tones.

They looked each other over for changes; they sat beside each other at the table, and Elizabeth asked questions and talked excitedly while he ate.

“Your hair is darker, and it’s curly,” she remarked, remembering the tow-coloured locks cut square across the boyish, sunburned neck.

Luther Hansen’s face crinkled into fine lines and his blue-gray eyes laughed amusedly.

“Got darker as I got older, Lizzie, an’ th’ typhoid put them girl-twists into th’ ends of it. Bet you’re a wishin’ for it—all th’ women folks do. Wish you had it.”

They went for a walk after supper and talked of many things. He was the same Luther, grown older and even more companionable. Elizabeth learned that both his parents had died, leaving the then seventeen-year-old boy a piece of land heavily mortgaged, and with nothing but a broken down team and a superannuated cow to raise the debt. By constant labour and self-denial the boy had lifted the financial load, and then happening to meet a man who owned this Kansas land had traded, with the hope that on the cheaper land he could reach out faster and get a good increase on the original price besides.

“I remembered th’ kind of land it was about here, an’ didn’t need t’ come an’ see it first,” he said. “I was goin’ t’ hunt you up ’fore long, anyhow. I never thought of these folks a knowin’ you, though, after I got here. Funny, ain’t it? I’m right glad t’ be back t’ you,” was his frank confession.

And Elizabeth Farnshaw looked up happily into his face, meeting his eye squarely and without embarrassment. It was as natural to have Luther, and to have him say that he wanted to see her, as it would have been to listen to the announcement from her brother.

“I’m so glad,” she replied, “and I’ve so much to tell you that I hardly know where to begin.”

Luther laughed.

“Mrs. Hornby thought I’d be put out about that room, but I told ’er nothin’ like that’d bother me if it brought you t’ th’ house. I’ve been sleepin’ under th’ wagon all th’ way down from Minnesoty an’ I can go right on doin’ it.”

They did not go far, but wandered back and sat on Nathan’s unpainted doorstep while the stars came out, and Elizabeth forgot all about the trials of the morning, and told him of her engagement to John Hunter.

“I’m going to live right next to your farm, Luther, and you must——”

Elizabeth Farnshaw had started to say that he must know John, and somehow the words got suddenly tangled in her throat, and the sentence was unfinished for the fraction of a moment and then ended differently from what she had intended: “And I shall be so glad to have you for a neighbour, and You’ll marry—now who will you marry?”

Luther, who had begun to like this new Elizabeth even better than the girl of six years ago, had his little turn in the dark shadow of Nathan’s overhanging roof at the mention of this love affair, but he swallowed the bitter pill like a man. The renewed acquaintance had been begun on friendly lines and through all the days which followed it was kept rigidly on that ground. He was glad to have been told frankly and at once of John Hunter’s claims.

In spite of the fact that Elizabeth had stumbled and found herself unable to suggest that John and Luther were to be friends, she talked to Luther of her plans, her hopes of becoming a good housekeeper, her efforts at cooking, and of the sewing she was engaged upon. He learned, in time, of the disagreements with her father, and was not surprised, and with him she took up the subject of the marital relations at home. Luther’s experience was more limited than Susan Hornby’s, but he looked the matter of personal relations squarely in the face and discussed them without reserve. There was always something left to be finished between them, and night after night they walked or sat together on the doorstep till late. Nathan looked on disapprovingly, not understanding the bond between them, but Susan, who heard the girl chatting happily about her coming marriage, saw that the friendship was on safe ground and laughed away his fears.

Nathan had found his first friend since his Topeka experience, and was unwilling to see him come to harm; also, while Nathan had come to love Elizabeth almost as much as his own daughter, and to miss her when she was away, he was uncomfortably aware that she prized a culture which he did not possess, and was subject to fits of jealousy and distrust because of it.

Days passed. Elizabeth could not induce herself to call on her future mother-in-law. The surety that she was cheapened by reports of her home affairs stung her consciousness and made it impossible to make the call which she knew she would certainly give offence by omitting. This, too, she talked over with Luther, and he advised her to go at once. Each day she would promise, and each day she would make excuses to herself and him, till at last the man’s sober sense told

him it must not be put off longer.

One evening, after John had been gone two weeks, and Elizabeth explained the fact of not having gone to see Mrs. Hunter because of the extreme heat, Luther suggested that she go over to the “shanty” with him.

“I forgot my coat, and it looks as if it’d rain ’fore mornin’,” he remarked. “I kept th’ harness on th’ horses, so’s t’ drive over.”

As Elizabeth expected, the visit to Mrs. Hunter was the first subject broached after they started.

“You’re goin’ t’ live in th’ house with Mrs. Hunter, Lizzie”—Luther always used the old-fashioned name—“an’ you must be friends with ’er,” he cautioned.

“I know it, Luther. I’ll go to-morrow, sure, no matter what happens,” the girl promised, her words coming so slowly that there was no mistaking her reluctance. “I just can’t bear to, but I will.”

Luther considered at some length.

“She’ll be lonesome, not knowin’ anybody here,” he said with almost equal reluctance. “I—I want t’ see you start in right. You’ve got t’ live in th’ house with ’er.”

The last clause of his argument was not exactly in line with the impression he wished to produce; in fact, it was only a weak repetition of what he had begun the argument with, but somehow, like Elizabeth, that was the main fact in the case which absorbed his attention. He was dissatisfied with it, but could think of no way to state it better; so to turn the subject to 181
something foreign to the hated topic, he remarked on a hayfield they were passing.

“Them windrows ought t’ ’a’ been shocked up,” he said, casting his eye up at the northwest to measure the clouds. “Jimminy!” he exclaimed, slapping the team with the lines. “I wonder if I’ve brought you out here t’ get you wet?”

He glanced apprehensively at Elizabeth’s thin print dress as the startled team jerked the old lumber wagon over the rough road, and half wished he had not brought her with him, for the signs were ominous. The breeze, which had been fitful when they had started, had died away altogether. Not a breath of air was stirring; even the birds and crickets were silent.

The storm was gathering rapidly.

They rounded the corner, near his building place, on a full trot, and plunged into the grove of cottonwoods which surrounded the “shanty,” with a consciousness that if they were to avoid a wetting, haste was necessary.

The faded coat, which was the object of the journey, hung on the handle of the windlass at the newly sunk well. The dried lumps of blue clay heaped themselves about the new pine curb and the young man stumbled awkwardly over the sunbaked clods as he reached for his coat. As he turned back toward the wagon an exclamation of dismay escaped him. The storm had gathered so rapidly that the boiling clouds could be plainly seen now above the tops of the ragged trees which surrounded the place. Instead of waiting to put the coat on, Luther flung it into the back 182
of the wagon, and, climbing hastily over the hub, turned the horses and drove them into the open road. One glance after they were free from the grove was enough. With a shout, he stood up, urging the horses into a gallop.

Boiling like smoke from the stack of a rapidly moving locomotive, the storm bore down upon the level Kansas prairie. Not a sound was heard except a dull roar from the north. Urging the horses to their utmost efforts with voice and threatening gestures, Luther looked back at the girl on the spring seat reassuringly.

“We’re makin’ good time, Lizzie,” he shouted, “but I’m afraid You’ll get th’ starch took out of that purty dress. I never thought of this when I brought you.”

Elizabeth, clinging to the backless spring seat with both hands, smiled back at him. It was only a storm, and at best could only soak their clothes and hair; but to Luther more than that was indicated.

As they rounded the corner and turned toward the north, a sudden puff of wind jerked the shapeless straw hat from Luther’s head and sent it careening dizzily over the stubs of the hay field at the right. Hats cost money, and Luther pulled up the galloping horses. Hardly waiting to see whether Elizabeth caught the lines he flung to her, he sprang to the ground and gave chase. The hat rolled flat side down against a windrow and stuck, so that it looked as if it were to be captured, but before he reached it the wind, which had now become a steady blow, caught it, 183
and as the only loose thing of its size to be found, played tag with its owner. At last he turned back, gasping for breath and unable to lift his head against the blast.

A fleeting glimpse of Elizabeth standing up in the wagon was all that he got, for a blinding flash of lightning split the sky from north to south, followed by a terrific crash of thunder. Half stunned, he fell into the deep rut of an old road crossing the hayfield at right angles to his course.

As he arose a moment later, a scene never to be forgotten met his gaze. One of his horses lay motionless on the ground, the other was struggling feebly to regain its feet, and Elizabeth was scrambling wildly out of the wagon. Rushing to her side, Luther drew her away from the floundering horse. A gust of rain struck them.

“Can you hold his head,” Luther shouted in her ear, “while I get him out of the harness?”

Elizabeth nodded, and together they caught the bit and laid the beast's head flat on the ground, where the girl held it fast by main force while Luther worked at the straps and buckles.

"At last!" he cried, when the name-strap gave way under his fingers. He flung the neck-yoke over against the body of the dead horse, and stepped back to free himself from the dangling lines.

Elizabeth let the horse's head loose and jumped back, still holding to the halter-strap. The frightened animal bounded to its feet with a neigh of alarm, dragging the girl out of Luther's reach just as a thunderous roar and utter darkness enveloped them. 184

What happened, exactly, the man never knew. He picked himself up, half senseless, some minutes later, covered with mud, and his clothing half torn from his body. At first he could not recall where he was; then seeing the dead horse in the road, and the upturned bed of the wagon itself, he realized that they had been struck by a cyclone.

The darkness had whirled away with the retreating tornado, and a gray light showed the demoralized wagon overturned by the roadside. The wagon was in painful evidence, but Elizabeth? Where was Elizabeth? Looking wildly about in all directions, Luther called her name:

"Lizzie! Lizzie! God in heaven! What has become of you?"

He remembered the fate of a girl in Marshall County which he had heard discussed only last week. That child had been picked up by one of these whirling devils and her neck broken against a tree!

With a wild cry, he turned and ran in the direction of the receding storm, calling her name and looking frantically on both sides of the path where the cyclone had licked the ground as clean as a swept floor. He could see nothing at all of Elizabeth. Realizing at last that he was wasting his efforts, and that some degree of composure would assist in the search, Luther stopped and looked about him.

Outside the immediate path of the cyclone, which was cleared of every movable thing, the hay was tossed and thrown about as if it had been forked over the ground to dry itself from the wetting it had had. Hay everywhere, but no living thing to be seen. Could it be that Elizabeth had been carried completely away by the storm, or was she buried in the hay somewhere? 185

Unresponsive as all nature to human emotions, the tumbled grass lay about him, a picture of confusion and ruin. The futility of human effort was borne in upon him as he scanned the waste. A pile larger than the surrounding piles separated itself from the scattered heaps at last. He regarded it eagerly. Yes! there was a flutter of wet calico.

Half rejoicing, half terrified at the prospect of what he might find, Luther Hansen ran and flung himself down on his knees beside it, dragging at the half-buried form of the girl in frantic haste. She was doubled together and mixed with the hay as if, after being picked up with it, she had been whirled with it many times and then contemptuously flung aside.

Drawing her out, Luther gathered her into his arms and listened to her heart beat to make certain that she still lived.

Though limp and unconscious, Elizabeth Farnshaw was alive, and Luther drew her up and leaned her loosely rolling head on his shoulder while he considered what to do.

A sharp, peppering fall of hail struck them. Luther looked about quickly for shelter. The Kansas prairie stretched level and bare before him. Not even a bush presented itself. The size of the hailstones increased.

Elizabeth began to show signs of returning consciousness and to move feebly. 186

The hailstones came down like a very avalanche of ice. It became necessary to interpose his body between her and the storm. He thought of the coat they had come to obtain, but that had probably gone with the hat and the hay and all other things in the route of the hurricane. He stooped close over her quivering form and let the frozen pellets fall on his unprotected head. The deluge was mercifully short, but at the end Luther Hansen was almost beaten into insensibility.

When the hailstorm was over the rain burst upon them with renewed fury, and the wind blew as cold as a winter's gale. The chill stung them into activity. Luther got slowly, to his feet, bracing himself against the blast as he did so, and also pulled up the now conscious girl. Elizabeth's strength had not returned and she fell back, dragging him to his knees at her side. The rain ran off her hair and clothes in streams, and against the storm her thin cotton dress was of no protection whatever. Luther urged her to control her shaking limbs and try to walk. It could only be accomplished by much effort. When at last she staggered to her feet, he put his arm about her and with bent head turned to face the rain, which cut like switches at their faces and cold shoulders, to which the wet cotton garments clung like part of the very skin itself.

The wind blew a gale. It was almost impossible to make headway against it. Had it not been for Elizabeth's chilled state Luther would have slipped down in a wagon rut and waited for the squall to subside, but it was essential that the girl be got under shelter of some sort At length, 187 after struggling and buffeting with the storm for what seemed an age, alternately resting and then battling up the road toward home, they turned the corner of the section from which the Hornby house could be seen.

Suddenly, Elizabeth gave a frightened scream. Luther, whose head had been bowed against the wind, looked up with a start.

“Good God!” broke from his lips.

Only a twisted pile of débris was to be seen where that house had stood.

With the impulse to reach it instantly, they started on a run, hand in hand, but the fierceness of the gale prevented them. Out of breath before they had gone a dozen yards, there was nothing to do but stop and recover breath and start again at a pace more in keeping with their powers. Impatient and horrified, they struggled ahead, running at times, stumbling, falling, but not giving up. Terrified by the thought of they knew not what possible disaster ahead of them, they at last turned into the little path leading to the ruined house.

Picking their way over scattered bits of household belongings, broken boards and shingles, for some distance, they at last reached the main pile of timbers. The girl’s heart sank at the thought of what they might find there, and she made a gesture of distress.

“This is no place for you, Lizzie,” Luther said, quick to comprehend, and sick with pity for her.

As he spoke, his foot sank between some timbers into a pile of wet cloth, and thinking that it was a human form, he shuddered and fell forward to avoid giving an injury the nature of which he could only guess. 188

They dug frantically at the pile, and were relieved to find that it was only a ragged knot of rainsoaked carpet. It indicated, however, the possibilities of the moment, and Luther ceased to urge the now frenzied girl to leave him, and together they stumbled about in their search. Darkness was falling rapidly, and they called first the name of Nathan, and then of his wife, beside themselves because they could not find even a trace of either to indicate their fate. Had the storm picked them up as it had done Elizabeth and carried them out of the wreckage?

Luther stopped and shouted the thought into Elizabeth’s ear. The wind dropped for an instant, and they stood looking about the place as well as the gloom would permit. The rain fell less noisily also. All at once they heard their names called from somewhere toward the north. Turning, they saw, what they had not noticed before, that the straw sheds and the granary were untouched by the tornado.

“Here, Luther! Here, Lizzie!” came another call from the granary door.

Nathan Hornby, faintly seen, was shouting to them at the top of his voice. A new dash of rain came, and the wind redoubled its fury as if vexed with itself for having carelessly let the wayfarers get a glimpse of the harbour where it would be unable to do them further harm. With a glad cry, they ran toward the beckoning figure, and a second later Elizabeth was lifted by Nathan and Luther into the open door of the bin-room, and literally fell across the shifting grain into Aunt Susan’s open arms, sobbing and clinging to her as if fearing that the fierce winds would snatch her away. The relief was almost too much for the girl. 189

“Aunt Susan! Aunt Susan! How could I live without you?” she sobbed.

Susan Hornby drew the horse blanket with which she was covered over the shuddering child in her arms, and patted and soothed her, crying softly for joy as she did so, for the fears of the last hour had been mutual. The thought of her darling out in the storm, suffering she knew not what, had unnerved Susan Hornby, and brought home to her as nothing else had ever done a realization of the precious relation between them.

“My daughter! My daughter! My Katy’s own self!” she repeated over and over.

The reaction of fright and cold and wet brought on a chill which set Elizabeth’s teeth to chattering audibly. Aunt Susan was beside herself with worry. Do what she would, the girl could not control herself. They rubbed and worked with her for some minutes. Luther was alarmed and blamed himself for having taken her out in threatening weather. Elizabeth insisted that no harm had come to her except a wetting, but could not convince the others till Nathan had a bright idea.

“Here! we’ll scoop these warm oats over you. They’re as warm as toast—havin’ th’ blazin’ sun on th’ roof of this place all day.” 190

The two men were alert for any signs of the old building toppling over under the terrific pressure of the wind, and had kept pretty close to the door; but they moved over in the direction of the two women, and using their hands as shovels soon had them well covered with oats.

“There you are,” Nathan shouted, when Susan had begged them to desist because of the dust they were raising. “We’ll set you folks a sproutin’ if heat an’ moisture’s got anything t’ do with it,” he continued.

He pulled some grain sacks out of the empty wheat bin and advised Luther to wrap them around himself. “I’m some wet, myself,” he announced, “but I’ve got warm ragin’ round here like a gopher. Now tell us how you folks come t’ get here in all this storm. What’d you do with th’ horses?”

All this had been shouted at the top of his voice, for the wind rattled and tore at the old building with the noise of a cannonade, as if determined to wreck even this shelter. It was not possible to see one’s hand in the darkness, for when the door had been pulled shut after the young couple, the last ray of light was shut out. Besides, night had fallen now, and the darkness outside was no less dense.

Luther told in as few words as possible of the catastrophe which had befallen them on the road.

“Why, Susan,” Nathan exclaimed, “th’ same twister struck them as struck us! Now don’t that

beat you? Funny th' stables didn't go, too. That's th' way with them things—they go along an' mow a patch a rod 'r two wide as clean as a whistle, an' not touch a thing ten feet away. Lord man!" he cried, turning toward Luther in the dark with a reminiscent giggle, "you should 'a' seen us. Sue saw th' storm a-comin', an' she run out t' git th' chickens in, an' nothin' 'd do 'er when she see th' way them clouds was a actin' but I must come in, too. We didn't even milk! I never see anything come on like it; we didn't hardly have time t' git th' winders shut till we could hear it roarin'! Lord, you should 'a' heard it come! All at onct it got dark, an' th' house begun t' rock; an' then it slid along on th' ground, an' then it lifted clear up at th' northeast corner, an' we slid down in a heap on th' other side along o' th' cupboards an' th' kitchen table an' crocks we'd set out for th' milk we didn't get into 'em, an' then th' house lit over on th' other corner an' went t' pieces like a dry-goods box. That kitchen table was th' savin' of us! I don't know how it got over us, but there it was with th' safe an' water-bench a holdin' th' timbers off'n us." Nathan wound up his story in a lowered tone, and there was silence for a moment as each went over his personal experience in thought.

"Gittin' warm there, Elizabeth?" he asked after a time.

"A little," the girl answered, still shivering, but with less audible chattering of her teeth.

"You'll be all right in half an hour," Nathan said with a relieved sigh. "I think we'll put a little more of these oats over you for good luck," he added.

They heaped the warm grain thick about her, and then, because it was hard to converse with the noise of the roaring wind outside, gave up the effort. The old granary had a good roof and did not leak; they grew less frightened, and Elizabeth grew warm in Aunt Susan's arms and slept at last. The rest lay long, listening to the angry blast, counting up their losses and planning to reconstruct so as to fit the new circumstances. For Luther another horse would be needed, while Nathan would have to build a house and furnish it anew.

After the wind subsided the two men discussed in low tones the best way of beginning on the morrow, and it was finally decided that Luther should go out and appeal to the neighbours to gather together and assist in sorting and saving such things as were worth it, and construct out of the broken timbers a habitation which would shelter them till a better could be erected. Fortunately, Luther had used none of the lumber of his last load, and but little of the one he had bought before.

It was almost morning before they fell asleep, and the sun was shining brightly before they awoke. As they emerged from the musty oats bin into the fresh air, which had been purified by the wind and rain of the night before, a curious sight met their eyes.

The house was indeed a wreck! Roof, side-walls, plaster, floor, and furniture were mixed in one indistinguishable mass. The kitchen table Nathan had mentioned stood as a centre-pole under a leaning pile of boards and splintered scantlings, and had evidently done much to save the lives of its owners when the roof fell. One end of the house lay, almost uninjured, on the grass, the window panes unbroken and still in their frames. Other windows had been hurled from the walls to which they belonged and ground to powder. Half the roof had been deposited between the road and the rest of the débris as carefully as if it had been lifted by some gigantic machinery, and was unhurt, while the other side, splintered and riddled, was jumbled together with joists, siding, and kitchen chairs.

They spent but little time over the ruin of treasures, but after a hurried breakfast, consisting of such eggs as they could find about the haystacks, and coffee—rainsoaked, but still coffee, which was dug out of a stone jar where it had fallen—the men went at once for help.

In spite of bridges washed out, and many hindrances, sympathetic farmers began to gather within two hours after Luther had started out. The lumber he had offered was brought and many willing hands began the erection of the simple four-room house on the old foundation. The place was cleared, furniture carried to one side, while broken timbers were carried to the other and sorted, nails drawn, and every available stick laid in neat piles ready for those who had brought saws and hammers for building.

Susan and Elizabeth sorted the soaked and muddy clothing, carpets, and bedclothes, and Mrs. Chamberlain and other neighbour women, around a great out-of-door fire near the well, washed and spread the clothes on the grass to dry.

As if by magic, a house arose before night and, minus doors and windows, but otherwise ready for occupancy, offered its shelter to the tired but grateful family. Broken bedsteads had been mended and put in place, feather-beds had been dried in the hot sun, straw ticks had been filled with clean hay; broken chairs nailed or wired together occupied their old places; the kitchen safe, with its doors replaced but shutting grudgingly, was in its old corner, and the unplastered house had a look of homey comfort in spite of the lack of some of its usual features.

Luther, who was a sort of carpenter, donated his services for several days, and except for patches of new weather-boarding or shingles mixed with the old there was little to indicate the path of a cyclone in the country. Yes, there was a pile of splintered boards tossed roughly together not far from the back door, and the usual fuel of corncobs was below par.

CHAPTER IX

“AGAINST HER INSTINCTS, AGAINST HER BETTER JUDGMENT, AGAINST HER WILL”

Mrs. Hunter did not come to help, nor to call upon Elizabeth and Susan Hornby, after the disaster, and Elizabeth was finally obliged to go to see John’s mother without any encouragement other than Luther’s urging.

The day came at last when the call had to be made, and for the first time Elizabeth came in contact with polite society which smiles and bows in polite form without any especial regard for sincerity. There was not a ripple of discontent on the surface at her future home. Mrs. Hunter might never have heard of the girl’s family difficulties. The girl might have called the day before, so courteous and charming was the dignified hospitality with which she was accepted. Elizabeth felt as if the most painful possibility of her life had been safely put behind her. She had been nervous and uncomfortable about this visit, and was correspondingly sensitive to the perfect manner of her hostess, and carried away with her a new problem to work upon: if John Hunter’s mother, by her poise and presence, made of his home a social unit of appearance and value, John Hunter’s wife must not fall below the grade of that home when she became its 196
mistress. She pondered long upon that subtle air of good breeding which ignored real issues and smoothed communication by seeming not to know disagreeable facts. Elizabeth decided that it was much more desirable than the rugged honesty with which the primitive folk about them would have humiliated themselves by explanation and apology. She would copy that suavity of manner. Also, she resolved not to discuss grievances. They were a bore and it was horribly countrified.

“I will not let myself think any more about it. I will be myself, and not be affected by what the rest of the folks do, and I’ll not let myself sit and fumble with my buttons because some one else is going to think about them. Mrs. Hunter’s manners are beautiful. I’d just love her if I didn’t know I was going to have to live with her,” she thought. Mrs. Hunter was a fixture in Elizabeth’s mental world, and her estimates were the standards Elizabeth considered when she sewed alone or when Aunt Susan was silent. The girl was both fascinated and repelled by them. Mrs. Hunter’s bearing was the subject of constant and delighted meditation, while the cold carefulness of it was a terrorizing nightmare. The girl kept up a conversation with Aunt Susan on the sewing, or a fire of mirth and jollity with Nathan or Luther, with this undercurrent of thought always going on. How was she to emulate that polish with so little experience in social affairs she would ask herself one moment, and the next would be harassed by the certainty that equal perfection in housekeeping and entertainment would be expected of her. There was no 197
escaping her fate. If she was to learn these things, she must learn them of John’s mother. There was no way of acquiring them beforehand. Elizabeth faced her position squarely: she decided to accept her teacher. At least Mrs. Hunter seemed willing to make it easy for her.

When Elizabeth went home that night she spoke in glowing terms of Mrs. Hunter’s friendly reception, and praised the real merit of her housekeeping, letting Luther see that she hoped to acquire it, and left the little group around the supper table in great good humour because the visit had been a success. She took Luther after the meal was over and went to look for the eggs about the haystacks, talking all the while of John Hunter’s mother in the happiest manner she could assume. The visit to John’s home had made her a bit homesick for John himself. Luther’s presence had so completely filled the days since John’s departure that she had not been lonesome for him, but the house with which he was associated had brought John back to the foreground of her consciousness with a rush, and Luther saw that she was aglow with longing for the man she was to marry. They did not walk as usual after the eggs were hunted, but went back to the house, where Elizabeth excused herself and soon went to bed. John was expected now at any time.

When John did arrive two days later he found a welcome awaiting him that was all that the most exacting of men could have desired, a thing which astonished him somewhat, for rumour had 198
reached him as soon as he had come into the home neighbourhood that the new Swede had cut him out. John came to see Elizabeth with curiosity predominating in his mind, though there was a distinct feeling of determination to master the situation if rumour had been right.

Luther was not at the house when John Hunter arrived. Elizabeth’s delight over her lover’s return was not a thing to be deceived about, but one thing left its impress upon his mind: Elizabeth called this new man by his given name and spoke of him as one speaks of an intimate. This was soon dismissed from John’s mind, however, for Elizabeth was all agog to learn about the Mitchell County land which he said he had bought, and John Hunter stretched his legs out comfortably in the mended rocker of Nathan Hornby’s little front room and talked enthusiastically of the pasture he would have for surplus cattle when he had got the farm in running order. No reference was made to Elizabeth’s affairs with her family. John was keenly appreciative of her joy in his presence, and the old relations were renewed; in fact, the relations were on a better basis than they had been for several days before John’s absence. By a curious stroke of fate, Luther was away from the house every time John Hunter called for over a week. It whetted John’s interest in the other man not to be able to see him, and it added an element to the courtship which had threatened to disappear. This other man on the scene made him apprehensive; he wanted the centre of the stage for himself, and he became more ardent. 199

Elizabeth was courted with sweet manner, and all her wishes considered.

The summer was a happy one. Aside from a simple white dress to be married in, and two calico dresses for house wear, Elizabeth put her own sewing away and helped Aunt Susan repair her quilts and carpets which had suffered badly in the cyclone. Two weeks had to be given up to the plastering of the remodelled house, and all the furniture was revarnished by their own hands. By the time all this was finished the girl felt a personal possession in every article the house contained, and it had indeed become a home to her. The home she had left was scarcely more than a shadow in Elizabeth's mind. The work of remodelling and brightening up Nathan's house was hastened because of the wedding, which they planned to have take place there. Susan Hornby and Elizabeth had grown closer than ever since the storm, when each had feared the loss of the other. They worked and sewed together, skimping Nathan and Luther on the cooking till the former threatened to turn cook in self-defence.

Mrs. Farnshaw had not come to help when the neighbours put up the demolished house. The bridges had been out and no one had gone to warn her that help was needed. When the news had arrived the omission had been taken as an offence and no effort had been made to go at all. The last week in September, however, Elizabeth's mother came to see her. The girl was helping Susan Hornby put fresh straw under the rag carpet in the front room. The straw was carefully 200
spread and the carpet tacked along one side of the room, and Elizabeth, hammer in hand, turned over from her knees to a sitting position and surveyed her mother with a dull fear at her heart; she knew what her mother's presence meant. Mrs. Farnshaw resented the new carpet, she resented Susan Hornby, she resented the comradeship she felt existed between her daughter and this alien woman who was no relation to her by the ties of blood. Ignoring Aunt Susan's courteous attempts to make her feel welcome, she drove straight to the object of her visit and demanded that Elizabeth come home to be married.

"I'm going to be married right here, ma," Elizabeth replied, twisting the hammer around in the other hand and filled with apprehension. She knew her mother's tendency to hold fast to foolish demands.

Mrs. Farnshaw's ready handkerchief went up to her eyes at once.

"Now look a' here, Lizzie, I ain't got no other girl, an' it's a pretty how-de-do if I can't have my only daughter married from my own house."

Elizabeth fidgeted about, laying her hammer down and picking up a straw that had pushed its way through the loose rags of the carpet on which she sat. After a time she turned her eyes to Aunt Susan with a mute call for help. Susan Hornby was decidedly uncomfortable.

"I thought of course you'd come home to be married," Mrs. Farnshaw continued. 201

"You know pa 'd raise a fuss as soon as I appeared," her daughter replied.

Mrs. Farnshaw brightened. She was strong on argument. Elizabeth's silence had disconcerted her, but if she would talk—well, Mrs. Farnshaw began to have hopes.

"You've been away all summer," she sobbed, returning to her handkerchief.

Elizabeth kept her eyes on Aunt Susan's face and did not reply again. There was another silence.

Mrs. Farnshaw began to be desperate.

"Folks has talked an' talked," she said, "an' I let 'em, because I thought when you come home for th' weddin' it'd put a stop t' their tongues. You've been down here, an' you don't know how hard it's been."

Elizabeth had listened in a distressed silence and studied Susan Hornby's face for signs of assistance.

"I guess they haven't talked——" she began at length, and then stopped short at something in Aunt Susan's eye which confirmed her mother's words.

"Oh, yes, they have," her mother hastened to say. "They say you ain't got no proper pride, an' they say you've got too stuck up t' live to home any longer, now that you're goin' t' marry rich, an' they say I can't make your things good enough for you t' be married in, an'——"

Mrs. Farnshaw had voiced her greatest grievance—her neighbours criticised her. She broke into such real weeping that it was impossible not to be moved by it.

Forgetting her policy of silence, Elizabeth argued and explained. Talking to her mother, but 202
keeping her eyes glued on Aunt Susan's, she went into details about the difficulty at home.

"You know pa 'll find some excuse to strike me as soon as I get there," she concluded. She had a painful sense of weakness and inadequacy in the presence of her mother's determination. Her own worries seemed so trivial in the presence of her mother's sorrow.

"E won't, I tell you," Mrs. Farnshaw repeated for the twentieth time. "E'll let you alone if you do th' right thing. We love our children—if th' neighbours don't think so," she wailed.

As she talked, however, she kept a shrewd eye on her daughter and soon saw that Elizabeth's eyes turned to those of Aunt Susan. It was not enough for this Hornby woman to be neutral; Mrs. Farnshaw decided to enlist her.

"If you had a girl you'd want 'er t' be married in your own house, I know," she said, leaning forward eagerly. "Suppose you only had th' one——" She saw the quick tears gathering. "Did

you ever have a little girl?" she asked.

Susan Hornby's emotions mastered her. She made no attempt to reply.

"Then tell 'er t' come home for just two more days," she said quickly. "I don't ask for no more than that. Just long enough to put an end t' this talk. I don't never 'spect t' have 'er after that, but——"

She sprang to her feet and, crossing the room, dragged Elizabeth to her feet also. 203

"I've got t' have you, Lizzie, an' that's all th' is about it!" They looked at each other a long time. Elizabeth weakened.

What could the girl do? Against her instincts, against her better judgment, against her will, she consented.

"See to it, then, that no new thing comes up to disgrace us," she said, stepping back to avoid the compelling touch of the hand that clutched at her sleeve, still looking across despairingly at Aunt Susan.

All help had been taken from that quarter. Bewildered, torn between her comprehension of mother love and a real knowledge of this particular case, Susan Hornby fumbled with the hem of her apron and did not look up.

Elizabeth, alone and without support, was easily victimized.

"I'll go," she said briefly.

So the peaceful summer ended for Elizabeth Farnshaw with her promise to go home. She hated to go, but the phrasing of her mother's plea, "just two more days," helped to sustain her. It had been a happy summer, two days would not be long, and then would come John and the new home.

There had been many reasons for the happiness of Elizabeth's last weeks of girlhood. The days had been full of pleasant work, and John had taken regular and masterful possession of her evenings. He came always such a picture of natty cleanliness and taste that it was a joy to be the object of his wooing. When John had found that Elizabeth was not in love with Luther, as she 204 had been reported to be, but accorded the old grounds of affection to him, he had spread himself comfortably in Luther's presence and drawn him into conversation whenever it could be done. In addition to a desire to set his well-polished boots in strong contrast against those of busy, unobserving Luther, the only dressing of which was an occasional soaking in oil to keep them from cracking, John Hunter had been half forced to like honest, kindly Luther Hansen. Luther was not a man to arouse antagonisms. He assumed his natural rôle with Elizabeth even before her fiancé and let the ground of their cordiality and friendship rest on such sensible basis that they were accepted as a matter of course.

John Hunter had been restless and half angry when he had first come home from Mitchell County—a thing he had not let Elizabeth see—but his feelings had been soothed and delighted by the display of her preference for him on his return. A new buggy had been purchased, and it was John Hunter's pride.

Elizabeth was unconscious of any rivalry. The new buggy was a great acquisition. It was the first to appear in that part of the country. She felt favoured to have it at her service, but the crown of all her felicity had been John Hunter's adoration, which had been poured at her feet without stint. If she wished to go anywhere, she had but to mention it. The relations of the early summer had been reëstablished. He talked of the new land, and of the cattle to be placed on it in two or three years, when the calves he was buying would be grown. The lots in which he had held an 205 equity since his father's death had been sold before his mother's departure from the old home, and twenty-five calves had been picked up from the surrounding farmers with the money thus secured. Every evening John drove to some farm to look for young cattle, and Elizabeth accompanied him. Cash had been paid for the Western land, and at the end of the summer most of the money that had been received from the estate had been invested.

As they drove from farm to farm, discussing prices; sheds, feed, and the wintering of stock, the girl's heart swelled with gratitude that her lines had fallen in such well-provided places. The pinch of poverty was to be lifted from her life.

More than the plenty, Elizabeth prized the peace which seemed to be drifting in her direction.

Every day since John Hunter's return had been a happy day. John consulted her judgment and her wishes, and it was done with that air of comradeship which was the most sought-for thing in Elizabeth Farnshaw's life. All her lonely days she had longed for it, and in all her girlish dreams it had been the prime factor. She had obtained glimpses of it in Susan Hornby's home, and now, she told herself joyfully, it was to be a permanent feature of her future life.

With Mrs. Farnshaw's advent a series of unpleasant things began to manifest. John was glad that the marriage was to take place in Elizabeth's own home. Because of their engagement, he 206 had heard little of the gossip about her, but it had been enough to make him suspect more and wish her well out of it. If now she would go home it would make the whole thing look right and stop the reports.

John Hunter was distinctly a man of moods and reflected the conditions in which he happened for the moment to find himself. When he came to see Elizabeth the night after her mother had been to see her, he was pleased that she was to go home the next day, but he instantly partook

of the discontent she showed. He took her to his mother's house for a short stay, but both were heavy of spirits and John was actually depressed. Elizabeth was almost abnormally sensitive to the attitude assumed toward her, and had she been shrewd she would never have carried any doubts of her own efficiency or judgment to her lover, but she was as open as a little child. John left her at the little gate and drove away so promptly that the girl's lip quivered as she turned in the dark to go to the house.

Elizabeth found Luther seated on the low doorstep. The shadow of the house prevented her from seeing him till she was almost upon him.

"Of all things! I never thought of you being here," she exclaimed, thinking of the kiss she had just received not three rods distant.

Luther laughed sheepishly.

"I hadn't intended t' see your good-nights," he said honestly, "but I'd 'a' made a worse mess of it by runnin' than I did by settin' still. Anyhow, you're goin' t' be married in three days, an' it needn't make no difference. I've been a thinkin' about you an' I waited up t' talk." He made room on the step for her to sit beside him.

"Thinking about me?"

"Yes. Mrs. Hornby says your mother was here to-day. She's kind of worried about it—you goin' home, I mean. I don't know about that—I hope It'll be all right. Try an' make it right, Lizzie. Th' Hunters go a good deal on looks."

Elizabeth was silent.

Luther felt it and interpreted her silence rightly.

"Is that something I'm not to talk about, Lizzie?" he asked.

The question hurt worse than the statement.

"I—I—don't know why you ask me such a thing, Luther," she faltered.

Luther arose. He was not to be offended, nor would he put away what he had waited to say.

"I only wanted to say that—well, do what th' folks ask of you, Lizzie. You're only home for a couple of days an'—an'"—after a long pause—"an' it won't hurt nobody."

Elizabeth got up slowly.

"Good-night, Luther," she said.

She wanted to offer him her hand; she was sure she was hurting him, but she could not talk to him on this point; the very truth of his suspicious that the Hunter estimate of her might be affected by scandal made of it a sore point. Elizabeth Farnshaw would be loyal to mutual relations, even where Luther's feelings were concerned.

They met in the morning on perfectly friendly ground, but there was an attitude of reserve which brooked no remark on her part. Luther departed early for his own house, and John Hunter came before noon to take her to her father's home. After all her simple possessions were in the wagon, Elizabeth went back and threw herself into the arms of Aunt Susan, who was crying miserably.

"Oh, Aunt Susan! I feel as if I had taken leave of you forever. I've—I've been so happy in this house—till yesterday. Can I ever repay what you've done for me?"

Susan Hornby gathered Elizabeth into her arms and sobbed more vehemently. The silence was unbroken except by those sobs, and at last the girl, moved out of herself, tried to comfort her, and said coaxingly:

"I'll live right near you. I'll see you every few days and—and I'll never forget how good you've been to me. It's—it's too bad these last two days had to be so—so different. I—I don't know what went wrong, but—but"—she laughed desperately—"where have our good times gone to? I'm going to be married to the man I love—and I'm going to live right near you—and—what is the matter with us, anyway?"

Susan Hornby clung to the girl and could not cease crying, till at last Elizabeth lifted her chin on one finger and with a corner of Aunt Susan's own apron, wiped the tears from the contorted face.

"Now then, don't cry," she said, kissing her again and again.

"Keep the folks in a good humour, dear. The Hunters 'll feel awful if anything more happens," Susan Hornby faltered, and then, to keep the girl from, replying, and to avoid the surprise and pain in the young face, pushed her gently but firmly toward the door and John Hunter, who was waiting impatiently.

CHAPTER X

"To-morrow," Elizabeth said, significantly, as John turned back to get into the wagon after they had deposited the trunk in the house.

"To-morrow," John smiled back at her. It was a reluctant smile he gave her, but the bid for affection in her young eyes was irresistible.

"He had to be nice," she thought as she walked back to the house; "it was a good way."

A sudden thought came to her.

"Did you ask Luther to the wedding?" she asked of her mother as she entered.

"No, I didn't. What do you want of that Swede?" Mrs. Farnshaw asked petulantly. "I should think——"

What she thought was never recorded in words, for Elizabeth was out of the house like a flash, calling to John Hunter as she ran down the road after him. It was a surprised John who took her message.

"Yes, I'll tell him, but I don't see what you want of that Swede—he always seems to cut such a figure in everything you do," John said discontentedly.

"Well, just tell him that ma sends the invitation, will you?" was all Elizabeth could say. 211

It was John's first contemptuous remark about Luther, and it disturbed her. They were to live closer to Luther Hansen than any other neighbour and it was essential that they be on friendly terms. She had hoped it might be that John would appreciate the good things in Luther which even his nationality could not spoil. Dear old Luther! In spite of the observation she had seemed to resent the night before, Elizabeth loved him—loved him all the more because she had been obliged to hurt him. It suddenly occurred to her that John might not deliver her message. She put the thought away from her instantly, saying aloud:

"He'd do anything he knew I wanted him to do," and then was struck with the doubtful tone in which it was said.

"What did you say?" her mother asked, for Elizabeth had just entered the door.

"Nothing. I hate this wedding!"

"Well, now, I like that, after all I've done to give you a good time," the mother said angrily.

"No, ma; you mean to give yourself a good time. You make me come home when I don't want to, and you ask people I hate to have, and then you leave out the people I want most. It isn't my wedding. I'm going to stand up and be married so as to get rid of it all, but John won't have the minister I want, you won't have the people I want, I'm most sure pa 'll kick up some kind of a row about it—and—and I was so happy till you came and made me consent to it. What did you do it for?" 212

"Do it for? You ungrateful child! What did I do it for? I'll tell you," Mrs. Farnshaw's eyes hardened into momentary coals of fire. "I did it because I don't like your whole goings on. Minister? Why don't you say preacher, like the rest of your folks? It's that Hornby woman. She made you talk of divorces——" At thought of all her supposed wrongs at the hand of Susan Hornby Mrs. Farnshaw broke into a half scream and ended by throwing herself into a chair by her daughter's side and clinging to her hand with her upturned face streaming over with tears, her mouth convulsed with pain till speech was impossible.

Moved to repentance at the sight of the pang she had caused, Elizabeth fell on her knees by her mother's side, and with her arms encircling her, cried contritely:

"I didn't mean it, ma, really—that is, I didn't mean it that way. Don't mind what I said. I do love you."

Mrs. Farnshaw clung to her, so shaken by sobs that she still could not speak, and the penitent daughter soothed and comforted her with her own heart breaking at the thoughtlessness of her speech.

"Put it away and don't remember it; I didn't mean it. I'm tired to death—and—and——" She pondered a moment and then made the experiment. "And I want to speak of Aunt Susan to you. I can't bear to have you feel so bad about me liking her. She hasn't put a single notion into my head. Be good and get acquainted with her. She'd like to have you. If you knew her you'd know how different she is from what you think. I'll take you to see her the very first time you come to see me. Say you will." 213

Elizabeth stroked the thin hair back from the passion-worn face, and waited for her reply.

Mrs. Farnshaw shook her head, but could not meet the offer squarely.

"The two of you'd be a wishin' you could get rid of me so's you could talk your own kind of talk," she said with conviction. "'Taint any use, Lizzie; I ain't your kind. Your pa 'd be madder at me 'n ever, too."

"Well, he's mad all the time, anyhow," Elizabeth said.

"No 'e wasn't till you said that awful thing—that is, 'e was mad often enough, but not like 'e's been since. You don't know what you done t' your mother then. Be good, an' go t' 'im, an' settle

'is mind 'fore you're married. It don't matter if I know Miss Hornby 'r not; but what a difference it'd make t' me if he only knowed I never put you up t' that partin' business! Please do it fur me, Lizzie."

This was an unexpected turn. Elizabeth had hoped to avoid the recurrence of this issue. Knowing that she was keeping her mother in cruel suspense, Elizabeth hesitated and by every sign showed her disinclination to discuss the subject. What should she do? What *could* she do? The tortured eyes of her mother studied her with an intensity which she could not avoid. To consent was to fail with her father, to refuse was to make matters much worse with the mother she had just hurt. Luther had warned her to avoid collisions with her family which were liable to cause gossip; Aunt Susan had implored her to keep the folks in a good humour; her own instincts were against the movement, but her feelings were pleading for the mother who begged her to try once again to obtain reconciliation before she was married. Ah! if this time would end it!

"Say you will," the mother begged with pathetic brevity.

"I'd do it in a minute if there were the least opportunity to succeed, ma," Elizabeth said reluctantly, and not looking toward her. "If I do it and fail, You'll be wanting me to go right on with it after I'm married, and that I won't do for anybody." The sentence ended savagely.

Mrs. Farnshaw studied her daughter eagerly. She began to have hopes. Now, if only she could get the right touch on her appeal.

"If You'll do it, an' be careful-like, Lizzie," she said compellingly, "if You'll be careful-like this time, I'll never ask you again. I can't live this way any longer. I won't never ask you again. Please," she insisted. "Speak real soft an' nice-like. Please."

"But, ma, are you crazy? You told me—you told me that—oh dear, what's the use to tell you what you said?" the girl cried, her judgment giving its last caution a hearing.

What was the use indeed!

In the end Elizabeth consented—consented with kindliness of manner. Since she was going to do it at all she would do it lovingly. She argued herself into that mood before she agreed to the move. Her mother had a hard life; on one who knew her doubted that fact. Neither would any one have doubted that Mr. Farnshaw led a hard life also. Some devil of unrest demanded excitement and disagreement.

"Keep the folks in a good humour," Luther had said.

Elizabeth had no support from any quarter. She could only consent.

"I'll do it, ma," she agreed. "I am going away to be happy. John and his mother never have a word together that isn't pleasant."

"I hope so," Mrs. Farnshaw said with relief, "but men don't always treat their wives like they do their mothers. It's something they get t' feel about their wives that's th' trouble. Women think th' only way t' be good wives's t' give up—an' men think so too. Women's most always afraid of what th' men 'll think, an' th' men know it."

"Well, ma, come on! There's lots to do; let's get at it."

Elizabeth was in no mood to philosophize. She hated the coming conference with her father to the utter exclusion of every other thought at that moment, and had hardly heard what her mother had said.

"You'll never regret bein' good t' your old mother," Mrs. Farnshaw said, rubbing her hand over the girl's glossy braids as Elizabeth turned away to begin the work she had suggested. "My! it don't seem like six weeks since I was your age—young an' startin' out—an' life looked good t' me, I kin tell you. Now I ain't got nothin' t' be good t' me but you."

"I think I'll wash my hair before the sun gets low," Elizabeth said. "Then I'll help you in here." She was disturbed about the promise she had given and wanted to get away from her mother before she should say some unlucky thing that would show it. She let her hair down and loosened it with a toss of her head. It was a glittering garment which covered her from head to knees in wavy strands which flew about her in lines of beauty as she moved about getting her hot water and towels. Mrs. Farnshaw watched her with an expression near real affection. She came over and ran her hands through the rippling mass as the girl turned to go out of doors where she could splash comfortably, and after she had gone passed her hands over her own faded locks slowly.

"Lizzie's always had th' best of everything," she said, shaking her head sadly. "I wisht she wasn't s' set against 'er pa. I'm goin' t' make 'er do it all th' same."

The girl in the backyard pondered upon the same thing as she dried her hair in the hot sun.

"I hate it," she thought, "but I'm going to do it just the best I know how. Ma *didn't* say it, nor agree with it, and I'm going to make it as easy as I can for her before I go. Will we ever be like they are?" she asked herself half seriously, and felt sure it could not be. "Ma has always insisted on things and never lets pa nor the rest of us forget anything or lay it down. I believe a woman can manage those things. Aunt Susan does."

As Elizabeth started to the house, she noticed her father and the boys coming from the cornfield with a wagon-load of snapped corn. Joe drove the team and his father sat in the back with his feet dangling over the end-gate. They were turning into the barnyard when she discovered

them.

With her hair floating about her like a veil, she started at once for the barn. She could not talk this out with her mother listening, and if she did not do it now it would be forced upon her at supper, when her father was certain to be in his worst mood. Mr. Farnshaw always came to the table tired.

Seeing Elizabeth coming toward him, Mr. Farnshaw dropped from the wagon and went to fill the swill pails. The hogs knew they were to be fed and set up their usual noisy clamour. It was his purpose to divert their attention till the boys could drive the wagon into the corral, hoping also to leave his daughter where she could not approach him. Mr. Farnshaw delighted in making people wait. With a pail in either hand he advanced to the fence. The hogs left the gate and ran to meet him, upsetting the trough as they came. Setting the pails down, he snatched up a peeled osage stick, kept outside of the pen for that purpose, and belaboured angrily the snouts sticking over the fence. The pigs were hungry and persistent. By the time they were beaten into a respectable awe and had backed away squealing, Mr. Farnshaw discovered his daughter at his elbow. He had intended to ignore her; he turned red with rage. With a look of infinite contempt, 218
he stooped and picked up a pail.

“What a racket they do make,” she remarked, smiling at him without offence.

In spite of her smiling manner, Elizabeth was half sick with apprehension. It was not a propitious time to approach him, but Mr. Farnshaw watched to see that a propitious moment should not arrive when he was in one of his sulking fits. Elizabeth had played that game with him before. With her courage oozing away, and a feeling that there was no benefit in seeming not to know what he was thinking about, she put her hand on his sleeve saying:

“Don’t be cross with me, pa. Really I *do* want to be friends.”

Mr. Farnshaw jerked his arm aside to avoid her touch and spilled half the pail of swill on the ground. He lurched over to the other side to right the pail; the bucket at his feet upset, pouring dishwater, milk, and potato peelings over his heavy plow-shoes as it went. To avoid the onrush of the greasy tide he sprang back, slipped in its oily overflow, and fell, the pail he held pouring its contents over him as he went. His gray whiskers, the bottom of his jersey, his very ears dripped swill as he arose. It was disconcertingly funny, and the girl helped him to his feet, laughing in spite of every effort to restrain herself.

To lose his temper was bad enough, but to be made ridiculous and be laughed at at the same time was more than the man could endure. He was insane with fury. There was such a look of malignity on his face as he jerked away and turned to face her that the girl, suddenly sobered, 219
dodged and started to run. Her long hair trailed across his arm, and lost to every consideration but that of satisfying his temper, he caught it as she passed and swinging the osage stick to which he still clung, shouted:

“Damn you! This is th’ kind of friends I’ll be.”

He struck with all his force, jerking her hair at the same time. Thrown from her feet, the full weight of the girl’s body came on her hair. It hurt cruelly. She veered around on her knees and caught the now tangled hair with both hands to ease the strain. He grabbed her by one arm and rained blows on her thinly clad shoulders which hissed in tune with the man’s temper as they fell.

“I’ll be friends with you!” he shrieked. “I’ll send you t’ that young smartie with some marks on you that’ll show ’im what kind of a wife he’s gettin’. You told your ma t’ leave me! Maybe You’ll be leavin’ him next. Tell ’im I said so, will you?”

Cut by the flexible withe, which left welts like ribbons on her young shoulders, the girl was unable to endure more passively, and struggled to free herself. The partially successful opposition infuriated the man. He was not accustomed to defence. His fury knew no restraint. He rained the blows harder than ever and the girl finally caught the whip itself. Catching the limber end desperately, she jerked it sidewise; unconsciously, she had deflected her father’s hand so that it struck her head just below the ear. It stretched her senseless at his feet.

Josiah Farnshaw was aghast. With a gulping cry of alarm and pity, he stooped to lift his 220
unconscious daughter. He had not intended to do so brutal a thing.

“Now look what you’ve gone an’ done!”

Mrs. Farnshaw had watched Elizabeth go to him with something of prayer in her heart. She knew the girl’s intention was to be square about the apology and she had strained every nerve to watch the encounter. At the first blow she had started to the scene of action.

“I think you might have——”

The man’s relenting mood vanished. He dropped the limp body and rose to his full height.

“You damned fool,” he exclaimed, “if you hadn’t set this a goin’ an’ kept it a goin’ this wouldn’t ’a’ happened. Of all th’ blasted, impossible things it’s t’ have a snivelling she-devil always at your elbow. Keep your hands off of me!” he cried, shaking himself loose from the detaining hand she had laid on his arm. “I’m goin’ t’ git.”

The boys had arrived by that time. They carried the girl to the well and bathed her face and hands with fresh water, while the head of the house strode down the road toward the north. Elizabeth was not seriously injured and recovered consciousness as soon as the water touched her. Mrs. Farnshaw left the task of resuscitation to her sons and looked after her rapidly

disappearing husband with eyes that longed for reconciliation. Reconciliation for one thing or another had been the most driving inspiration her twenty years of married life had known; it was her most potent incentive. Cowed and broken, fear bound her fast to his footsteps. Not even the daughter struggling to her feet at her side could detract her attention from his receding form.

Elizabeth stood balancing herself dizzily for a moment before she began really to see or grasp what was going on around her; then the full value of the mishap broke upon her. All that Luther and Aunt Susan had hinted at had befallen her in spite of every effort to avoid it.

But not even the calamity which had befallen them could stop their busy fingers. The preparations for the wedding feast were a merciful feature of the rest of the evening. The guests had been invited and must be prepared for. The hair that had been washed was braided, the mother's tears dried, and every member of the family pressed into the service. The entire house was cleaned and rearranged. Not till after midnight did the members of the little group seek their beds. Mr. Farnshaw had not returned. They had even forgotten him a large part of the time in the hurry. Elizabeth regarded the half dozen bruises which her sleeves would not cover with alarm when she was at last ready to climb her ladder. Joe covered them with a liniment which he brought from the barn. As he set the dusty bottle on the kitchen table after the anointing had been done, he remarked dryly:

"Wonder if you an' me 'll ever do that kind of thing t' our young ones? Everybody's always said we was like the old man."

"Take that nasty smellin' bottle out of here, an' don't begin any talk about your pa. Everybody get t' bed," Mrs. Farnshaw commanded.

Even the absence of her husband could not dim the interest of Mrs. Farnshaw in the coming spectacle of her daughter's marriage. With the capacity of a little child to suffer from unkindness or neglect, she combined the same child-like capability to enjoy pageantry of any sort. Benches for curious neighbours surrounded Mrs. Farnshaw's bed when she retired, and unaccustomed things filled every nook of the usually unattractive room. Evergreen boughs stared at her from the corner opposite her bed; the bed was to be removed in the morning. It had been her own romantic idea to have a bower for the bride and groom. She had been so busy making that bower that she had forgotten her own troubles for an hour and more, but she remembered them now and her interest died out. With a quivering indrawn breath she turned out the light and dived into the huge feather-bed, smothering her sobs by crushing her pillow against her face.

Elizabeth, upstairs, had her own disappointments to go over, and her mother's sobbing coloured her ruminations. Her vision had been cleared. In spite of youth, and of humiliation, she saw that the blow that had undone her had been accidental. She saw what the encouragement of temper would lead to. She saw the gradual growth and stimulation of that temper in the daily contentions of her father and mother.

She rubbed her bruises and thought long on the troubles about her. Accusations and defence, she decided, were at the root of them. They were the universal topics of the conversations at home and among all the people she had ever known except the Hornbys and the Chamberlains.

"Defence!" she said in a scornful whisper. "What does it matter *who* is wrong in anything? The only thing that matters is *what* is wrong and to find a way to make it come out better next time," and at last went to sleep quite unaware that she had evolved a philosophy which rightly applied would reorganize the world.

CHAPTER XI

"WIVES, SUBMIT YOURSELVES UNTO YOUR HUSBANDS, AS UNTO THE LORD"

The day after the wedding was Friday, or "sweep day," as Mrs. Hunter called it. Anxious to begin as she expected to hold out, and to form regular habits in John's wife, Mrs. Hunter superintended the housecleaning processes.

Elizabeth had had no idea that any one could put in so many hours with broom and dust rag, but when it was done, looked about her with housekeeperly delight in the orderly, well-kept rooms. As they had worked that day the girl had been keenly observant of John's mother. She could not tell whether John had told her of the trouble in her home or not. Mrs. Hunter did not refer to it directly or indirectly, and this fact was the subject of much thought. This faultless manner of dismissing unpleasant things stood out in strong contrast to the endless and tiresome discussions to which the girl was accustomed. Elizabeth wished she could find time to run over to Uncle Nate's for a chat with Aunt Susan, but the busy day absorbed her and there was no time to go anywhere; in fact, it was time for John to come home from Colebyville, where he had gone to hunt for a hired man before the cleaning was really finished. Glancing up at the clock on

the lambrequined shelf in the sitting room, the girl was surprised to see that it was already four o'clock. The cleaning was finished and she ran to the kitchen to put up the rag in her hand, and then went hurriedly into her bedroom to comb her hair and get her dress changed before John should come.

Absorbed in her dressing, Elizabeth did not hear her husband enter the house until she heard him talking to his mother in the dining room. With freshly combed hair and clean calico dress she ran with a glad little bound to meet him.

John Hunter and his mother stopped short with their conversation when they saw her and were plainly embarrassed.

The young wife became conscious that something was wrong and stopped in the middle of the room, looking from one to the other in mute inquiry.

Mrs. Hunter turned and went back to the kitchen. John came toward his wife.

"What is it, John? What has happened?" she asked in a whisper. There was a sick look on John Hunter's face.

Elizabeth did not put her hand on him as was her usual way. The girl-wife had an indistinct feeling that her husband and his mother were a combination for the moment of which she was not a part.

"Enough has happened," the man said, passing her and going toward their bedroom. "Come in here!"

He held the door open for her to enter, and she passed in and stood waiting while he shut it behind them.

"What is it, John?" she queried, unable to wait longer.

"Your father has gone to Colebyville and got into a drunken row," was the bald statement. "Everybody in the country knows about his fuss with you."

He did not offer to touch her, but walked over to the window and began to drum on the window-pane with nervous fingers.

"Drunk! Row! My father was never drunk in his life!" was the astonished exclamation with which Elizabeth Hunter met this unbelievable accusation.

"Well, he's been drunk enough to last the rest of his life this time, and we're the laughing stock of this whole country."

John Hunter had gone to Colebyville that morning in the new buggy, rather pleased to be the centre of observation and remark. He quite liked to swagger before these country people whom he chose otherwise to ignore. He was well dressed, his buggy was the admired of all admirers, and he was newly married. Country gossip had some pleasing qualifications. When he had arrived at Colebyville, however, John Hunter had found that country people had little ways of their own for the edification of the vainglorious, and that trim young men in buggies became infinitely more interesting to the scorned when they could be associated with scandal. He soon found that he was the object of much amused discussion and shortly it became evident that they were quite willing that he should know that he was the object of ridicule. Pretending friendship, one of them enlightened him as to the exact circumstances which were amusing them, and then sneaked back to his companions with a verbatim report of his surprised exclamations. John Hunter did not enjoy being the victim of a trap laid by those he had patronized. It had been a humiliating day, and John Hunter always handed his misfortunes along. He poured his disgust over his wife as if she alone were responsible for all he had suffered that day.

"What was the row with you about, anyway?" he inquired with evident aversion to her presence.

Elizabeth had withered into a quivering semblance of the confident woman who had run to meet him five minutes ago. Her knees shook under her with collapse. She sat down on the edge of the bed and stammered her explanations as if she had been a naughty child caught red-handed in some act of which she was ashamed.

"It—oh, John! I only went to him to make up about—about other things. We—we didn't have any fuss exactly. It—it was just the same old thing. I—I begged ma not to make me go home. I told her what he would—I knew he'd whip me, but she would have me go."

"Well, he couldn't whip you for nothing," John said, with brutal inquiry. "What'd you fall out with him for? I never heard of such a thing as a girl who was a woman grown that fell out with her father till he whipped her."

Exasperated and miserable, John bestowed blame in the only convenient place he found.

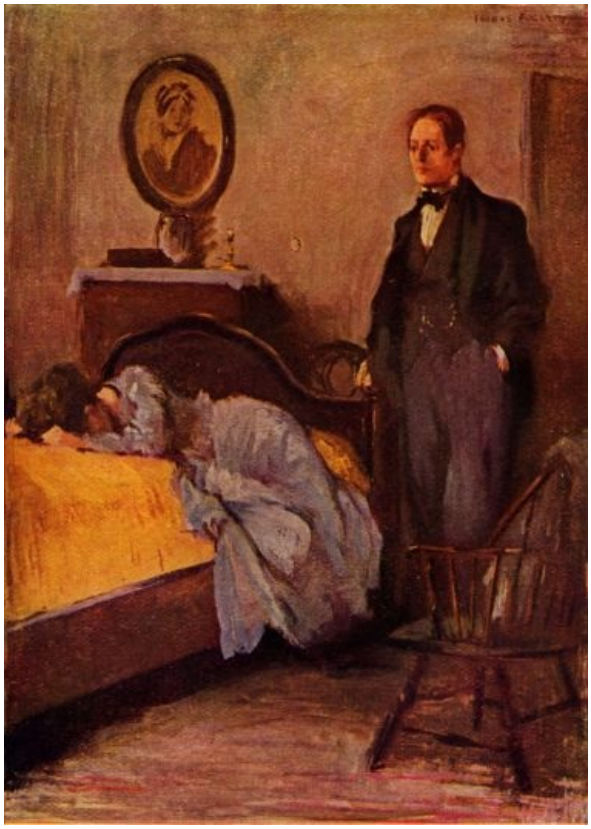
The young wife buried her face in the counterpane and did not attempt to reply, and after looking dully at her for a moment John Hunter went out and left her to carry her burden of shame alone. The sound of the closing door assured her that at least she could be alone in her tears, and the humbled girl gave herself up to sobbing. Luther and Aunt Susan would never be quite convinced that she had done her best to avoid trouble; she even wondered herself if there might not have been some fault in the way she had approached her father. As usual, Elizabeth was concerned with the trouble of others. The whole dreadful thing passed before her with the vividness of actual reproduction. John's mother knew this at any rate. That was a sore point. They were in the kitchen talking it over now! With the conviction of absolute certainty, Elizabeth buried her face in the counterpane of her bridal couch and sobbed in desolate

abandon.

After a time John came back again and looked into the room. Seeing her distress, he went over slowly and lifted her to her feet with a stir of pity.

“Don’t cry,” he said gloomily. “It can’t be helped. Come on out to the kitchen and help mother with the supper.”

Elizabeth knew that at that moment he did not want to caress her, but her hungry soul craved comfort beyond her power to control and she dug her face into his breast and sobbed there unasked.



“THE YOUNG WIFE BURIED HER FACE IN THE COUNTERPANE AND DID NOT ATTEMPT TO REPLY”

John’s arms closed about her in a relaxed sort of way, and patting her head half-heartedly, he said again: 229

“Come on, dear. Mother’s out there getting supper alone.” He took his own pocket handkerchief and wiped her tear-stained face and, after kissing her, pushed her gently but firmly toward the kitchen.

Supper was not a cheerful meal. Elizabeth’s voice was thick from crying and she did not talk at all, while John and his mother could not discuss the topic uppermost in their minds in her presence. The feeling that there was a combination of which she was not a part grew upon the young wife, and a longing for Aunt Susan grew with it.

“I’d like to go over to Uncle Nate’s immediately after supper,” she said. “I’ll do the dishes while you hitch up.”

“Good Lord! I don’t want to go over there to-night,” was the reply. “I wish you’d quit calling those people ‘Aunt’ and ‘Uncle’.”

Elizabeth’s face blazed with colour as he got up and went into the sitting room. The brutality of the answer was so evident to John’s mother that she followed him.

“You had better take Elizabeth to Mr. Hornby’s, John. I don’t think you should speak to her in that way, either,” she said in a low tone of voice.

Elizabeth could not hear Mrs. Hunter’s remarks, but John’s reply was audible enough.

“I’m not going over there to-night. I don’t feel as if I ever wanted to go anywhere again.”

She also heard Mrs. Hunter’s low “Sh!” and felt more than ever an alien. 230

When the dishes were finished Mrs. Hunter went upstairs. John followed her.

“I will not be hurt, because I will not see hurt,” Elizabeth told herself as she slipped through the house to her own room. Because her lips quivered as she said it, she busied herself in taking down her hair to brush for the night. Her sleeves were tight and hindered, and she took off her dress and folded it across the back of a chair carefully, and finished braiding her hair in her petticoat.

John found her with her white arms uplifted as she combed the long strands. Moved by her

girlish beauty and freshness, he went over and put his arms about her. The girl's mouth was full of hairpins, and she mumbled something he did not understand. He kept his arms about her insistently, and rubbed his chin on her smooth shoulder with a little laugh. She struggled to free herself, but he held her teasingly, and finally accepting the playful tussle as an apology, though she knew it was not an adequate one, she gave up. She was resolved not to split hairs with her husband over small matters; she would not nurse grievances.

As for John Hunter, he had not thought of apology,—or of the necessity of one; he had been moved by the sight of the tempting figure of the woman he possessed.

Elizabeth loved her husband and wished to believe that he loved her; she was unwilling to begin her married life with any sort of whining or suspicion, so she ended the matter by resting unresisting in his arms and turning her young face up to be kissed. 231

The next morning Elizabeth washed the dishes alone, and Mrs. Hunter followed John to the barn and later to the pasture, where he went to catch a horse.

"Where are you going with a horse?" his mother asked as they passed through the pasture gate.

"I have to go over to Chamberlain's to help with a small stack of hay he put up in the field and wants to move, now that he's got the time. I told him he'd better let me help him before the new hired man comes to begin the husking; I'm going to need the team every day after that," John replied.

"So you got a man, did you?" Mrs. Hunter said, catching hold of his arm to keep him from outwalking her. "If you're going as far as Chamberlain's you'd better take Elizabeth over to Mr. Hornby's while you're hitched up. I'll get dinner. You hurt her feelings last night, and that'll be a good way to make it right with her."

"Now look here, mother," John Hunter answered decidedly, "I'll do nothing of the kind. With this story going around we'll stay at home where we belong. Anyhow, the sooner she's cut away from these country jakes the better for her, and I'll begin right here and now. I don't intend—never have intended—to have these people tacked to my coat-tails every move I make. If she's hurt, She'll simply have to get over it; besides, she didn't stay mad long—you saw that for yourself. She's all right if she's managed right."

It was true, Mrs. Hunter reflected. Elizabeth had not seemed to take much offence, and was perfectly good-natured this morning. She did not intend to interfere with the affairs of her son 232 and his wife. Elizabeth seemed submissive, and promised well. She hoped that this horrid gossip would die down. That was a nasty thing to be mixed up with. Mr. Hunter had never had anything like that happen to him before, and she was devoutly glad they were away out here in Kansas where no one who had ever known them would hear it. Elizabeth would be all the better as a wife if she did not start out by running around too much. It did not occur to Mrs. Hunter, nor to her son, that if the old acquaintances were to be taken away from Elizabeth that in all justice she must be provided with new ones. In fact, it did not occur to them at all that her opinions were of any value whatever. Why should John explain his plans to her? Why, indeed?

As she went about her Saturday morning's work Elizabeth watched John and his mother stroll down the path in the pasture, certain that she herself was the subject of their conversation, and her eyes burned with unshed tears. The intimacy between John and his mother seemed so much more firmly established than the intimacy between John and herself that she was filled with lonesomeness and a longing for Aunt Susan.

"To-morrow's Sunday and there'll be nothing to do. He'll have to take me then. He was tired and upset by that horrid talk last night. Oh, why do I have to be mixed up with things I can't help—and—and have him cross, and everything?" She ended with a little shuddering cry, and buried her head in the kitchen towel and gave up to the tears which, now that she was alone, she could 233 candidly shed. How she longed for Aunt Susan, and yet she could not have talked to her of these things; but in spite of that she wanted her.

"Will you go over to—to Mrs. Hornby's with us to-day?" she asked Mrs. Hunter at the breakfast table the next morning.

"Why—yes—if you're going," Mrs. Hunter answered with a hesitant glance at John.

The tone and the hesitancy struck Elizabeth. She looked at John as she had seen the older woman do.

"Mother spoke yesterday of your going," John said quickly, "and I said—well, I want to get some more cleaning done about that barn before the man comes. There's plenty of time about that. Let them come here if they want to see us."

"But I want to go," Elizabeth persisted. She had been accustomed to dictating where John Hunter should take her. John himself had taught her to do so.

"Well, there's plenty of time. I'm busy to-day, if it is Sunday," was all that her husband thought it necessary to reply.

The hope that Aunt Susan would come to see her if she found that they were not coming over helped Elizabeth to accept the brusque refusal better than she otherwise would have done. John was cheerful and pleasant, and the hurt that she had felt at first died away. He asked her to go to the barn with him and was merry and full of small talk and chatter, such as lovers appreciate, 234 and the girl finally concluded that that must be his naturally decided manner when suddenly

approached on a subject to which he could not consent. Elizabeth was aware that there was little consideration shown her at such times, but was resolved not to find fault unless the question were a vital one. Altogether it was a happy day. Gratitude was a large feature of Elizabeth's make-up, and there was something about being in the atmosphere of refinement and beauty which made her accept many little evidences of inattentiveness on the part of her husband. As she helped with the cooking, she was conscious of the difference between the kitchen utensils of this and her own home; as she swept she contrasted the red-and-green ingrain carpet of the sitting room with the worn and ugly rag carpet of her mother's house; as she set the table she reflected that no other house of that community boasted a dining room, and certainly no other young wife could say she had napkins and a white tablecloth every day in the week; and there was yet a larger item than these for which the girl was thankful: no girl she had ever known had married so cultured a man. Elizabeth looked across the table as she served the pie at dinner and in spite of every snub was humbly thankful to be a part of that family. Nor was she a mere snob and deserving of what she got in the way of ill treatment because she submitted to it; Elizabeth was a young girl of artistic temperament, craving beauty, and longing for the companionship of those who talked in terms comprehensible to her at the same time that they advanced her æsthetic education and possibilities. In proportion as she valued this thing was she to pay her price.

The price Elizabeth was to pay came at strange and unexpected moments. The hired man, when he appeared, proved to be Jake Ransom, now a man, and ready to do a man's work in his simple station. Jake of course knew for whom he was to work and came into the kitchen to his first meal with his face wreathed in a sheepish grin.

"I'd better 'a' taken your advice an' gone t' th' high school," he said, extending his calloused hand to shake. "Only I wouldn't 'a' been workin' fur you."

He laughed his great hearty guffaw, partly in embarrassment and partly because he really enjoyed the joke of the possibility of him being an educated man. It was a cheap country pleasantry, and said with genuine good-fellowship, but Mrs. Hunter, who heard it as she turned to the dining room with the coffee pot in her hand, disapproved of the familiarity of it. Mrs. Hunter had disapproved of the plate laid for Jake at the family table and was out of sorts with the country life into which she had been plunged.

After Jake had gone to bed upstairs—and that was another grievance of Mrs. Hunter's, this having the hired man in the room next to her own—she took up the matter of his position in her son's house seriously.

"All the hired help in the country eat at the table and are accorded the privileges of any member of the family, mother," John replied to her objections.

"You don't mean that You'll have to have them at your table day after day—always?" his mother exclaimed. "You'll never have any home life at all."

"As long as we farm, mother, we'll be in exactly that position," John said, stirring the fire in the sitting-room stove, about which they were gathered for the evening.

"But they eat so awfully much," Mrs. Hunter continued, "and they drink out of their saucers, and suck their teeth till it makes one sick!" Then happening to look across at Elizabeth she caught the flush on her young face and stopped so short that all were embarrassed.

John got up suddenly and left the room and the house. The two women sat in an uncomfortable silence for some minutes, and then the elder of them went upstairs to bed, leaving the younger to her mortifying thoughts. Elizabeth remembered the scorn of the young teacher in her own childhood for the same offence and reflected that she had been unable to break her family of similar habits. As far as she was concerned, however, the presence of the hired man at her table was far less disturbing than that of her husband's mother. Part of the time she was happy to learn from Mrs. Hunter, but more of the time she was restless under her supervision.

The week had been an uncomfortable one in both tangible and intangible ways. Elizabeth had often found John and his mother talking and have them drop the conversation when she appeared. She had had many humiliating hours over the disgrace she knew they were discussing. The fact had come out that Mr. Farnshaw had returned to his home, but nothing beyond that.

Another week passed, and again John refused to take Elizabeth to see Aunt Susan. This time he said that the team had worked all week, and that he felt that the horses needed rest. A new team was added to the farm assets and the next Sunday John said he was too tired himself to go away from home. Never once did he say that he had any motive which extended beyond the time at hand. Each Sunday the excuse fitted the circumstances of that particular day, and he talked of going in a general way as if it were a matter of course that they would go soon. It was clearly the duty of the young couple to make the first visit, and as clearly Nathan Hornby and his wife were waiting for them to do so. Elizabeth was puzzled by her husband's refusal. At the end of a month she became alarmed for fear their neglect would give offence to the dear couple who had sheltered her when she was in need. It had not occurred to her to discredit John's reasons, though she began to suspect that she had married the sort of man she had heard much about—the husband who never wanted to go anywhere.

Early in December Mrs. Hunter was called East by the serious illness of a sister in Illinois. The day she left a heavy snow fell. Elizabeth went out into the still yard and let the white flakes fall on her uncovered head with such a sense of freedom as she had never felt since her marriage.

“The house is mine,” she whispered ecstatically; “the house is all mine, and now I can go out of doors if I want to and not be criticised.” 238

Elizabeth had been far more accustomed to barn life than the life of the house. This was a thing that Mrs. Hunter could not understand. It was not the correct thing for a woman to go about the barn where a hired man was employed, even if her husband worked at his side, and Elizabeth’s trips to the cow stable and granaries had been discouraged. Jake Ransom had been shrewd enough to see that his first joke in the Hunter house had been unpleasant to the mother of his employer and had never trespassed upon the grounds of familiarity again, but Elizabeth had been criticised until willing to give up her trips to the scene of her husband’s work. John might be impatient, but Elizabeth loved him; his mother was patient but critical, and Elizabeth did not love her; therefore the first feeling of relief when the older woman had gone away included the delight of being free to go where she wished—at his side. The barns were a source of great interest to Elizabeth. The pride of the girl, accustomed to straw stables and slatternly yards and unhoused machinery, in the well-kept barnyard of her husband was natural and commendatory. John had order well developed in his scheme of things. John’s cribs did not stand open to the weather. Now that Mrs. Hunter was away, Elizabeth spent most of the day going about the place, looking into every bin, and making the acquaintance of each new animal they possessed. Jake was helping Silas and it left the girl plenty of time to explore. The amount of new stock 239
struck her as surprising. Here too she was glad. John was evidently going to be a man of large affairs. Elizabeth had a sudden desire to run over and talk it over with Luther as she had done when she drove out with her affianced husband to buy the calves. She was surprised to see how the little bunch of calves had grown, not only in size but in numbers. The thought of Luther carried her back, as she stood looking over the calf yard, to the matter of visiting Aunt Susan. Of late the feeling had grown strong upon her that Mrs. Hunter had had something to do with John’s reluctance to making this visit. The calves ceased to interest her and she wandered slowly back to the house thinking about it. There were so many phases of her domestic affairs to consider: Aunt Susan’s right to the evidences of her love and her inability to show that love because of her husband’s reluctance to take her; Luther’s evident offence, and the possibility that the wedding invitation had not been extended to him by John, since he had never paid them a neighbourly visit; the close alliance between John and his mother and the brusqueness with which John disposed of any request of hers if he did not choose of himself to do the thing she wanted—all called for examination. Elizabeth shook the snow from her hair and cloak and built up the fire, intending to sit down by it and think over her situation, but John arrived in the middle of her preparations and supper had to be hastily prepared, for the afternoon had gone and much of the regular morning’s work still remained to be done. With flying feet, Elizabeth attacked the task of getting things in order, and it was a relief when John, who had left the last 240
chores to Jake, came in and helped her. They had hardly ever been left alone in the house in all the three months they had been married, and to Elizabeth it was working in fairyland to have John make one side of a bed’s clothes lie smooth while she pulled and straightened at the other.

With Mrs. Hunter gone, John took up the task of drilling his young wife in the Hunter ways. To Elizabeth he was a model husband. She contrasted her father’s stupid inability and unwillingness inside of his home with the orderly and systematic way in which John Hunter helped her. John took part in whatever household function was taking place in his presence. He wiped the dishes if she washed them; if a carpet was to be swept he handled the broom if he were there to do it, and he never went to the field without filling the reservoir and water pail as well as the coal scuttle and cob basket. He assumed the management of cooking and housework so subtly that the unsophisticated girl saw only his helpfulness; in fact, he had only helpfulness in mind. John had ideas of neatness and order which made of housekeeping a never-ending process, but John himself laboured steadily toward their accomplishment, and he was so successful in inspiring her with those same ideals that her pride helped her over many a weary day’s cleaning. She entered into them week after week and became expert at ironing, baking, and all the little offices of the domestic altar. All her strength was given to her work each day, and for a time she succeeded comfortably, but as the days shortened and the routine became 241
more exacting she longed for the out-of-door freedom in which she had been raised.

Christmas passed, and still Elizabeth had entered no house except her own since her marriage in October. This would not have disturbed her, for she was not a girl who cared for visiting, if it had not been that Aunt Susan was being neglected.

Mrs. Farnshaw came and did not fail to let Elizabeth know that the country gossips were concerned with tales supposed to account for her secluded way of living. Some said that she was too “stuck-up” to associate with her old friends, while others said that John Hunter had married her to keep his house, but that he was not proud of her and preferred to leave her at home. Luther had completed his “shanty,” and Elizabeth knew by the smoke she could see rising from his chimney that he no longer lived with Aunt Susan; also Elizabeth heard bits of gossip about him from Jake, who had taken a great liking to Luther and often spent his evenings with him. Luther Hansen had come to borrow a scoop shovel when he had shelled his corn, but John had managed to accept it as a barnyard call and had not invited him to the house, and after the scoop was returned Luther did not come again. Elizabeth had days when she wanted his cheery presence and sensible ways of looking at life, but she was almost glad he did not come; she could not have explained her seclusion to him nor could she have refused to explain. The girl’s pride was cut to the quick. 242

January passed, and February. One afternoon in early March Elizabeth sat at the dining-room window sewing and meditating sadly upon John’s growing irritability whenever she mentioned

Aunt Susan. She was unable as yet to force him to take her as she requested; neither had she been able to get her own consent to going the first time to the house of this old friend alone and have Aunt Susan's questioning eyes looking her over for explanations. She was puzzled still, for John usually spoke of her friends with respect, and there was nothing to indicate his reasons for opposition except that he was simply averse to visiting on general principles, and even then why should he so resolutely refuse to accommodate her when he was so reasonable on all other subjects?

"I don't care, I'm going this week if he's ever so cross," she muttered.

Almost at the same instant she looked up and saw a bobsled coming into the side lane.

"Aunt Susan's very self!" she cried, pushing away the little garment on which she was sewing, and running to the door.

She met the muffled figure halfway down the path, called to Nathan to take his team to the barn, where they would be out of the cutting wind, and bundled Susan Hornby into the house with little shrieks of delight and welcome.

Susan Hornby knew that she was wanted at the end of that five minutes.

"However could you know that I was wanting you so bad to-day?" Elizabeth said finally, as she 243
thrust her guest down into a rocking chair and then went down on her knees to unfasten her overshoes.

"Land sakes! What are you trying to do—and you——" The sentence stopped and the speaker looked embarrassed.

Elizabeth, still on her knees, looked up. A soft blush covered her face as she gave a happy little laugh.

"Yes—it's true," she whispered. "Oh, Aunt Susan, I'm so happy!"

Outside, Nathan Hornby seized the opportunity to look around the barns.

"Good cattle sheds," he remarked to himself. "Good bunch of pigs, too. I hope 'e ain't goin' into debt, as they say, but I swan, it looks like it."

Nathan's survey of the barns had given the two women inside the house time to talk over the affair so close to their hearts, and the little sitting room had been turned into a temple by the presence of a young mother that was to be and that older but childless mother who loved her as her own. Elizabeth, still on her knees, laid her head in Aunt Susan's lap as of old, and Susan Hornby, with every hurt buried, listened to her confessions, with her free hand feeling its way over the thick braids as she prayed earnestly in her heart that her beloved child would go through the travail awaiting her without harm and not be left childless in her old age.

When Nathan's heavy boot crunched on the snow-covered doorstep, Elizabeth ran to meet him with the broom and a whole world's wealth of welcome in voice and manner. 244

"I'm so glad you came to-day. I've been wanting Aunt Susan *so* of late. Isn't it a heavy snow for this late in the season?"

She rattled busily along to carry the impress of welcome, for the old man had not responded to her as his wife had done.

"Well, now," said candid Nathan, "you don't exactly give one th' impression of pinin' t' see folks when you never come over at all."

Elizabeth knew that though he regarded the broom with which he brushed at his boots with extra attention, he was listening closely for her answer.

"There's John!" she cried, seeing her husband as he drove a bunch of calves into the lane. She hastened to tell her guest that her husband had been some miles to the west to attend a sale, and pretended to have forgotten Nathan's awkward remark.

She was glad to see that John left Jake to turn the calves into the yards and came to the house at once, with cordiality shining out of every line of his face. He made Nathan Hornby so welcome that every sign of displeasure faded from Nathan's countenance. He gave a hasty brush at his boots and came in to shake hands with Susan Hornby. He stirred the fire briskly, and remarked to Nathan:

"Ain't that a dandy bunch of calves? I had a chance to get them at that Irishman's sale—I forget his name—oh, yes, Tim—Tim—you know? I ought to know myself since I just signed a note to 245
him. Averaged eighteen dollars a head—forty-three of 'em. With corn at thirty cents, they'll turn quick money."

The fire roared under his vigorous poking, and he applied himself to putting more coal in the stove without looking up.

Elizabeth Hunter's face lost the happy expression with which she had been regarding him as he welcomed the old couple and stirred the fire, presumably for their benefit. He *had* been glad to see them: they had helped him over an awkward announcement. He had not told her he meant to get these cattle, and he had let her think that he meant to take her advice and not go into debt any more than he had already done.

John Hunter heard his wife's low exclamation of surprise. He was glad it was over.

Susan Hornby heard it too and caught the sick look on her face, but though she wondered about

it she asked no questions, for Elizabeth Hunter was a woman of reserve. Elizabeth Hunter had developed a power unknown to Elizabeth Farnshaw.

“Got a good many sheds built a’ready, I see,” was the next remark the girl heard.

“Yes,” John replied, still devoting himself to the fire. “I expected to get the stock sooner—haven’t used it all this year—but it’s there for next season. I’ve got about all the cattle I’ll get now. I told Carter I’d take seventeen head of his. He was going to put them up at his sale next week, but I persuaded him to let me have them in a bunch. I’ll get them home to-morrow. Got ’em on 6 per cent. They’ll grow into money every day this summer—mostly two-year-olds. Don’t you think so?” 246

“That’s all owin’,” Nathan replied slowly. “Cattle take a lot of cover, an’ you ain’t usin’ straw sheds.”

“Oh, my sheds ain’t cost so very much,” John replied easily. “They’re substantial too. I don’t think much of the straw-shed business. It’ll do for Hansen, now, that ain’t got anything to put under cover, but when a man’s got anything——” John filled out the sentence with an expressive gesture, and then before any one could speak said casually: “By the way, I hear the Swede’s going to be married to-morrow.”

“Married?” Elizabeth Hunter exclaimed. Every word of the conversation had been a stab, but to have Luther called a Swede was too much.

“Yes, dear,” Aunt Susan said, laying a hand on her arm. “I meant to have told you and I hadn’t got to it yet. Nate and I are invited to the wedding. It’s Sadie Crane, you know.”

Elizabeth fell into the nearest chair utterly limp. “Sadie Crane?” she said over and over.

“I knew you’d hate to have it Sadie, but any woman could be glad to get a man as good as Luther, and she’s crazy over him. He’ll make her a good husband whether she makes a good wife or not. She’ll have her own way a good deal further than most wives.”

John Hunter suspected that the latter was said for his benefit. 247

Nathan and Susan Hornby disagreed, as much as it was possible for them to do, on the way home.

“You may say what you please, if she don’t come it’s because she don’t want to. You couldn’t ask for a more rousin’ welcome ’n *he* give us,” Nathan said as he watched the forefoot on the off horse to see whether it was a cake of snow that made it limp or a more serious trouble.

“It wasn’t any more rousing than hers was when I went in and—and look how he spoke of Luther,” Susan replied hesitatingly. She hardly dare point out the weakness of John, however angry she was at him, for she had had trouble enough to get Nathan to bring her at all.

“That’s so,” Nathan admitted. “They’re a pair of snobs, anyhow. You think she treats you all right, but you saw how she shied round th’ subject when I put it straight to ’er. I went because you wanted me to—but I ain’t sure——” Nathan Hornby ceased to speak before his sentence was finished. Elizabeth’s neglect had been another nail in the coffin of his friendly trust. Susan had had hard work to persuade him to bring her to-day and had hoped that some lucky circumstance would help to dispel his suspicions. This had looked possible at first, but she saw that he still nursed his grievances.

Susan had her suspicions also, but they were of John, not of Elizabeth. Elizabeth had been as glad to see her as she had always been, whatever there might have been that was unexplainable on the surface. Susan Hornby knew with a knowledge that was unassailable that Elizabeth Hunter loved her as much as Elizabeth Farnshaw had done. 248

“I don’t care, I’m going again some day before long,” she said; “she won’t be going out much now for a while.”

“Well, now, look here,” Nathan said, stubbornly sticking to a conviction from which he was unable to get away. “You think Hunter keeps her from coming. He give us more of a welcome ’n she did, a good sight.”

Susan Hornby glanced around at her husband in astonishment. She had never said that she thought Elizabeth was prevented by John from coming to see them. Nathan had measured her better than she had realized.

“No-o, he didn’t,” she replied slowly. She resolved to speak frankly. “You didn’t see her when she took me into the house. Honestly, Nate, it was better than a whole revival service to have that girl tell me of—of——”

“I didn’t see that,” Nathan interrupted, “I only know he *was* glad t’ see us; you saw that for yourself.”

“I was just going to say——” Susan considered a moment and then said firmly: “He was glad to see us because there was something about those cattle he hadn’t told her. Didn’t you see the look on her face?”

“That wouldn’t make no difference with th’ way he’d do by us. ’E was as glad as could be, an’ asked you t’ come back ’s if you’d been ’is mother. It’s some stuck-up notion of hers—this thing of them not visitin’ their neighbours.”

Susan looked up at him indulgently. 249

“You won’t refuse to be good friends with her—for my sake, Nate. She was as glad to see me as

a little child."

"Why don't she come t' see you then?" Nathan asked sternly, able only to see the one point.

"I don't exactly know, Nate. I couldn't crowd her on that matter—she looked so worried when I brought it up that I just let it go. I only *know* she wants to come."

They dropped the subject and rode along over the smooth road, too absorbed in their own thoughts to get pleasure out of this last sleighride of the season, both endeavoring to solve the problem from their own viewpoint, Nathan full of distrust and suspicion, his wife too well versed in human nature to doubt Elizabeth's honesty or believe that she was spoiled by a fine home or an advanced social position. At last she spoke her conclusions:

"There's something in her face I like better'n ever, but there's a worried something there I don't like to see."

Nathan was sorry he had criticised Elizabeth. Sue loved the girl. Nathan and Susan discussed, but never argued. If Susan remained of her first opinion after talking a thing over, Nathan conceded within himself that she had some good reason for her convictions even where he could not agree.

"Sue 'll have t' see it for herself," he meditated. "I'd be glad t' see 'er right. We'll see how it turns out." But as he tried to get himself into that frame of mind he remembered how many days had been spoiled for his wife that winter because she longed for Elizabeth, and he involuntarily 250
muttered:

"Dirty little huzzy!" and ground his straggling teeth as he thought of it.

After Nathan and Susan Hornby had turned into the main road, John walked slowly back to the house.

"What'd I say that Mrs. Hornby didn't like?" he asked, as he entered the kitchen where Elizabeth was preparing the supper which Nathan had declined to stay and eat.

Elizabeth's brow was drawn into a puckered wrinkle. She followed her own laborious thinking, unaware that her husband had spoken.

"What'd I say that riled Mrs. Hornby?" he repeated.

Elizabeth heard the question now and looked up. It was hard to answer. To mention the tone in which he had spoken of Luther was useless she knew. Her hesitancy annoyed her husband.

"Well, what's wrong?"

"Nothing—that is——" Elizabeth could not discuss it.

John Hunter resented her silence. He turned without speaking and picked up the water pail quickly. John heaped coals of fire by performing household duties.

Reflecting that he was going to be angry whether she talked out or not, Elizabeth laid a detaining hand on his arm and spoke of what she felt she could get his attention fixed upon.

"I was thinking of all that money we're going to have to pay some day, John. I—I've tried before 251
to make you understand me. Oh, John, dear, don't you see—but then, no, of course you don't, you've never had the experience of it. You see, dear, I've had it. It takes the heart out of people. You never get rid of it after you get into it once. You just go on, you get old and quarrelsome—and—and you never have any good times because you're afraid of something—of the interest that's got to be met, and things. Why won't you let me help you? You didn't tell me about these last cattle, nor the Carter lot. Why——"

"Now look here, Elizabeth, a man can't run to the house and consult a woman about every little thing he does, before he does it. I always tell you when I can. I told you about this."

Irritability was John Hunter's strongest weapon.

"I don't want you to run to the house to tell me about every little thing you do," the young wife explained patiently, "but these debts will not be little things when they come to be paid off, dear. Really, you don't know how they will sap you and me later on; they may even take the farm right out from under our feet. There are so many things that can happen to cattle—and interest *has* to be paid. That's the awful part of it, and——"

John fidgeted uneasily and did not look at her. He wanted to get away. He had not come in to talk of this. Elizabeth held his sleeve and he had to say something.

"I haven't failed to get what you need out of this money," he said at last. "I can't have you shutting out opportunities for business. I'll raise the interest. If I furnish the money I ought to 252
be free to make a living the best way I see how. What do you know about a man's business?"

Desiring only to convince him, which she could not do if he were irritated, Elizabeth laid her paring knife on the kitchen table and put her arm about her husband's neck coaxingly.

"Of course you get everything I need, dear; that isn't the trouble. I don't want to shut out opportunities for business either, but I gave up my education to help pay interest. I know how hard it is to raise. The calves die, and the cows don't give milk enough to make up the difference. The loss—— Oh, I know," she said putting her hand affectionately over his mouth to still the objection he had started to offer. "You think beef cattle will be different, but black-leg gets into a herd of beef cattle just as readily as into the cows and calves, and frosted corn is a

liability Kansas farmers always have hanging over a crop. I'm not complaining about the cattle that are paid for—it's those we'd have to pay for that were dead. The money was yours and you had a right to spend it as you chose, but the debts will be *ours*. The skimping and saving will fall on me as much as on you, and skimping makes people mean and penurious. Promise me you won't go into debt without telling me again."

"Forget it, little woman," John replied, patting her face and kissing it many times. "I'll never do anything to disgrace you." 253

He had not replied to a single argument; he had not made a single promise. Elizabeth submitted to his caresses with a sigh. It was useless. She could not fall out with him for the sake of the child that was coming. She resolved to accept what she could get and try to be patient.

"I'm glad you were so nice to Aunt Susan," she said, trying to get away from the impossible and make as much as she could out of the possible. "we'll go over Sunday. I'd begun to think you'd never do it. We'll take them by surprise."

John Hunter laughed indulgently. "You think you got me that time," he said, and escaped to the well without further remark.

Elizabeth looked after him, and pondered, with a quivering lip, on the wilfulness of the refusal to promise. She had been so sure that she was escaping the hell of mortgages and interest when she married. The farm was already carrying every cent the loan companies would give on first papers. If anything should happen to the stock they would have to put a second mortgage on part of it. John was determined to work on a large scale. She had tried many times to show him how hard it would be to raise large incumbrances, but whenever she did so he became fretful and for days spoiled the home comfort for which she strove. Elizabeth tried to model their home life after that of Aunt Susan, and leave her husband free to use his own judgment, but this matter of indebtedness was alarming. She knew how slowly money came in on the farm and how 254 impossible it was to raise a mortgage once it was plastered over a piece of land. Already she saw the day of payments, note-renewals, and chattel mortgages staring them in the face. Elizabeth's pride had suffered a fall. She saw the weary years stretch ahead of them without joy and without hope other than that which those about them had, unless some special providence assisted them to avoid the common lot of farmers. As she went about her table-setting, however, the quality of the linen, of the dishes, of every object in the room differed from anything she had ever known, and the hope of youth came to her aid. This home should be different from the rest; she would make it so by patience as well as by its possessions. The black-leg was not an immediate danger, and she would look for the best.

Winter passed, and spring. The patience Elizabeth had vowed to command had been tried to the utmost in some particulars. John had never taken her to see Aunt Susan. Sometimes he said "wait till next week," sometimes he said he was tired, more often he retired into his accustomed irritability, and at last because of the evidences of her pregnant state she ceased to desire it. The winter had not been totally unpleasant. If she did not irritate her husband they were very happy together. John had pleasant little ways about the house and was as helpful as the most exacting woman could demand. The spring had been harder because Elizabeth had less strength and the house and garden work had increased. It took three hired men to keep the farm work 255 done, and there were many mouths to fill.

One particularly hot day in June John unloaded on the kitchen table an armful of groceries he had just brought from town, remarking as he did so:

"I brought home some dried blackberries for pies, Elizabeth."

Hepsie Brown, the lately acquired hired girl, stood at Elizabeth's elbow, and began to put the parcels away in the cupboard.

Elizabeth took a couple of letters he was handing her and went into the sitting room to read them. John followed her in.

"Be sure you make the pies," he said with an emphasis which showed he meant to have it remembered.

"All right, dear."

"You'd better cook the fruit to-night," he added.

"All right. I'll tell Hepsie."

"Better do it yourself," he cautioned.

"She can do it. I'll tell her," Elizabeth said without looking up, but she knew that that would not end the discussion the moment it was out of her mouth. She recognized John's most unpleasant insisting mood.

"Mother always tends to her own pie-baking. Girls never get things right," he said emphatically, waiting for her to raise her eyes to his.

"Yes, yes, dear," the girl answered, looking up as he required. "She can do it just as well as I can; it don't hurt her to stand on her feet." 256

She had given the sign of submission and he was ready to be pleasant about it, but he reiterated the demand.

"I know, dear," he said, kissing her, "but I can't bear to have things coming on the table not

right when we have men about. It don't take long to make a few pies."

Elizabeth rose wearily, put the letters down and went to the kitchen. Her face was drawn and there was a fagged, weary droop to the shoulders. John demanded that the house and cooking be kept up to the city standard, forgetting that there was a garden to keep in order also, besides little chickens to feed and butter to be made. If Elizabeth had said she were sick and had gone to bed, John would have had the doctor come to see her twice as often as necessary, and would have exhausted the little town of Colebyville to supply such things as she could eat, but it never occurred to John Hunter that as long as his wife was able to go about the house that she might know what she should do much better than he.

Elizabeth was unable to defend herself. She coveted peace, and she could not have peace unless she responded to John's suggestions. Also, at this time Elizabeth was determined that she would not be cross. The coming child absorbed her mind as much as it absorbed her body. She would not let one hour of discord or inharmony affect its life. Elizabeth had no idea how to manage her husband so as to get him even to listen to her side of an argument. The girl was worn out by useless things which she could not avoid doing.

Elizabeth was extremely nervous at this period of her life. John went to bed full of healthy 257
fatigue and slept soundly till morning, and knew nothing of mental and physical strains which left his wife more tired in the morning than when she went to bed at night. Elizabeth had been a strong girl, but she was supporting the life of another; she tossed and moaned through the two or three short hours in which she could sleep, and for the rest lay wide-eyed, staring into the darkness, filled with terror at what the rapidly approaching future held for her. In her girlish imaginings and fears, ignorant of the facts a young mother should have known, she had magnified the sufferings of childbirth till life was a network of horrors, and her nerves were at the breaking point.

The next morning Elizabeth, with aching back and trembling knees, her face flushed from the heat of the stove, stood at the kitchen table rolling out the pie crust. A tear rolled down her cheek. Hepsie, who stood near and was regarding her sympathetically, laid firm hold on the rolling-pin.

"I knew you'd no business t' do it. Now you go in an' set down in th' rockin' chair while I finish this here batch of pies."

Hepsie was older than Elizabeth and making pies had been her business; the crust was mixed and the fruit had been cooked the night before. Reflecting that not much could happen to a pie after getting that far on the road to perfection, Elizabeth let the rolling-pin be taken from her hand and went in wearily to throw herself on the lounge to rest. 258

John came into the kitchen and his face darkened.

"Tell Mrs. Hunter that I look for Hansen to help with the grain to-day, and that I told him to bring his wife with him," he said to Hepsie, and went out, banging the door after him.

Elizabeth had heard him come in and had risen to explain, but stopped short when she heard that Luther had been asked to help. Her first feeling was of a joy which brought the tears to her eyes. John had been persistently cool whenever Luther had been mentioned since their marriage. The next feeling of which she was conscious was an intense distaste to having Sadie in the house with her all day, and this was followed by the thought that John had known that Luther and Sadie were coming since the day before and had said nothing about it to her; but small time was given her to think about any phase of the matter, for Luther's familiar, unpainted wagon was at that very moment coming into the side lane. With a conviction that she had not been told till it was absolutely necessary, Elizabeth walked promptly out to meet her young neighbours.

It was the old Luther which greeted her.

"You know my wife, Lizzie," he said with such a happy look in Sadie's direction that Elizabeth's heart responded to the call for open friendship. Luther never nursed suspicion.

"I should just say I did," Elizabeth replied warmly, extending her hand to the little woman Luther was setting on her feet. Luther climbed promptly into the high seat from which he had 259
just lifted his wife and held his own hand down to Elizabeth from there.

"It was mighty fine for you to send word for her t' come along."

And Elizabeth did not let him gather from any hint of expression or word that so far from sending word for Sadie to spend the day with her, she had not known till in these last ten minutes that either of them was expected. John came and talked to Luther, mounting the spring-seat at his side to ride to the field, but did not look at Elizabeth, though she looked at him longingly and everything in her cried out for reconciliation and openness. John had a way of ignoring her when explanations had to be made.

Luther's attitude toward his wife had influenced Elizabeth in Sadie's favour as nothing else had ever been able to do. She began to feel less hostile, and as they turned toward the house asked her interestedly how she was "coming on" with her garden and chickens. This was common ground, and Sadie warmed to the real welcome she was accorded. She stopped beside Elizabeth's coops in the backyard and examined the little groups of begging, downy balls with the animation of a true farmer's wife. Here was something she knew as well as Elizabeth; in fact, when a count was made it was discovered that Sadie's broods several times outnumbered those of the neighbour she envied. It was an absorbing topic of conversation, and the two

women stood for some moments with the hungry little beggars clamouring lustily about them. Suddenly they became conscious of the smell of burning sugar.

“Oh, my goodness!” Elizabeth exclaimed, and ran to the kitchen, leaving her guest to follow as she chose.

Hepsie had gone upstairs, and as Elizabeth opened the oven door a cloud of smoke rolled out which nearly blinded her and set her to coughing.

Sadie followed her in and somehow her mood changed as she looked over the well-kept kitchen. Something in the tidy order and tasty arrangement of its shelves hurt. Sadie was not a natural housekeeper.

“Bet she just thinks she beat us all,” she thought as she laid her bonnet on the sitting-room sofa, where she had felt of the pillows, and the lambrequin which hung from the long shelf where the clock and vasts stood, on the opposite side of the room. “Bet she don’t put on no airs about me just the same.” She looked at the small bookcase below the mantel in a perfect rage of envy. Elizabeth was surrounded by the things which befitted Elizabeth, and Sadie realized as she had never done in their childhood the chasm which separated them, and knew nothing of the anguish of the young wife as she laboured with the disfigured pies, nor that Elizabeth thought of the look of love she had seen Sadie receive with something very like envy in her heart.

Elizabeth thought long upon the joy in Luther’s face as he greeted her. John must have made some move about the request for help which covered the neglect of all these months adequately to Luther. Sadie finished her inspection of the inner regions and returned to the kitchen primed with things to be said to her rival, and Elizabeth fared badly at her hands. Her innate refinement would not let Elizabeth strike back in the coarse way in which she was attacked, and she listened to hints and pretended sympathy on the subject of Farnshaw domestic difficulties, of reported debts which John Hunter had contracted, and neighbourhood estimates of the fact of her own secluded manner of life since her marriage, till her head swam and her memory was scorched for many a day. But though her head ached and her knees almost refused to perform their office, Elizabeth remained in the kitchen and superintended every dish prepared for that harvest dinner. The fact that the pies had scorched left her with the feeling that John had had a foundation of real fact for his demand that she give them her personal attention, and left her humbled and ready to beg forgiveness. Every fibre of her cried out for the trust she had seen in Luther’s glance at Sadie. *There* was true marriage, and the state which she laboured daily to establish.

At dinner John did not look at Elizabeth, though her eyes sought his constantly, and when the pie was passed around she remarked on its trimmed edges shamefacedly.

Silas Chamberlain wiped his knife on a piece of bread and slid it under the section nearest him.

“You never mind about them edges. It looks like a good pie t’ me, an’ John here will eat his share of it, I’ll warrant you. Th’ rest of this company can survive if he does. I just been a thinkin’ as I set here what a stunnin’ cook you’ve got t’ be in these ten months. I used t’ think you’d have a lot t’ learn after you was married, but you seem t’ ’a’ learned it short off—eh, John?”

John Hunter had to reply. “I’ve been sorry mother had to go away. Elizabeth’s done pretty well, but mother would have been a great help, with her fixed ways of doing things,” he said reluctantly.

Luther had been looking earnestly at John, but spared Elizabeth when he saw her confusion by looking quickly down at his plate and saying nothing.

“Don’t know’s Lizzie needs any help as far as doin’ things is concerned, though she may need more rest,” Silas returned; and Sadie took up the subject.

“I think my stove bakes a little better on the bottom,” she remarked critically.

“I low t’ taste your pies to-morrow if it don’t rain,” Silas answered her without looking up from the bite he was severing with the knife upon which it was to be conveyed to his mouth.

Luther Hansen’s laugh rang out heartily.

“Don’t,” he said, winking at Sadie. “She’ll be keepin’ me out of th’ field t’ fire th’ oven.”

The sting of the criticism was drawn by Luther’s merry acceptation of it. Sadie laughed too, but the hint left its rankling point. These same men would harvest for them on the morrow, and as Sadie looked over Elizabeth Hunter’s well set table she knew that she would not have the advantage on her side.

“Lizzie’s always had th’ best of everything,” she thought.

Silas Chamberlain thought over the day’s events as he rode slowly home. While unhitching, Old Queen nipped angrily at Bob, who had sniffed at her collar pad, and Silas cuffed her ears.

“Whoa, there, you spiteful beast! You’ll be wantin’ pie that’s a leetle better done on th’ under crust next. Drat ’er! I could ’a’ fit right there, only—well you kin allus hit harder with that kind of folks if you don’t let yourself git riled. Pore little woman! Not little, neither—but a year ago so young an’ glowin’ with happiness. Used t’ make me think of a bob-white, trottin’ up an down these roads s’ contented like, an’ allus so friendly an’ sociable. Looks ’s if she didn’t have spirits enough t’ laugh at nothin’ these days. Looks ’s if she’d had a peep into a den of wild beasts an’ was afraid they’d break out an’ get ’er. Liza Ann’s got t’ go an’ see ’er, an’ I’m goin’ t’ tell ’er so.”

As Silas went toward the house, he stopped suddenly and looked back at the wagon, which stood in the same place he had left it that rainy afternoon over a year ago.

“She looked that peert with ’er red lips an’ bright eyes, a askin’ if th’ school board was t’ meet. Pore little woman—she ain’t a goslin’ any more, an’ ’er new feathers ain’t turnin’ th’ rain very good neither,” he reflected, shaking his head.

The long day ended at last and John came to the house after the evening chores were finished. Elizabeth waited for him in her bedroom. Throughout the entire evening she had been telling herself that she must make this thing right. For the sake of the expected child she must not let her mind be disturbed with the hurt feeling she had been unable to put away since John had gone out without letting her explain about the morning’s baking. She allowed herself no angry or resentful thought for the prolonged and cruel reproach. Dry-eyed, she sat by the open window in her nightdress, making buttonholes in a tiny slip as she waited. She heard him deposit the basket of cobs beside the kitchen stove, which he never forgot to bring in at night, and by the rattle of the dipper which followed and the chug, chug, chug of the pump knew that he was filling the reservoir. Breakfast on the farm was an early meal and greatly facilitated by small preparations. John never forgot nor neglected his part of the household duties. Elizabeth sighed. John had the appearance of right on his side when he demanded her highest efforts at the household altar. She put away the little slip as she heard him coming toward the bedroom and rose to meet him. The tears came in spite of every effort to stay them, and to hide her face she dug it deep into his shoulder while she sobbed out her story. It was a full minute before John’s arm went about her, but at last reflecting that something was due one in her condition, he patted her heaving shoulders and said as if addressing a child:

“There, there now, I never thought of you feeling so bad,” and after a minute’s thought added, “but you see, dear, the part of the dinner you saw to yourself was all right, and the pies had to be apologized for.”

CHAPTER XII

“PORE LITTLE WOMAN”

Silas Chamberlain answered to a loud knock on his door at the midnight hour. It was the first week of August.

“From Hunter’s, you say?”

There was a mumbled conversation at the door.

“Why, yes, of course. Come right in—glad t’ have you. When was you called—an hour an’ a half ago? Now you come right upstairs, an’ we’ll have you in bed in two shakes. There now—them covers’ll be too heavy, I ’spect, but you kin throw ’em off if you don’t want ’em. Jest keep that light. I’ll git another downstairs. Good-night. Oh, yes! Jake’s gone for th’ doctor, you say? Started an hour an’ a half ago? Guess ’e ain’t there yet—seven mile you know. Well, good-night!”

Silas stumbled down the steep stairs.

“Liza Ann, it’s come! Pore little woman!”

He got back into bed and lay so still that his wife thought him asleep. “Pore child!” she heard him say just as she was drifting off to dreamland. An hour passed. An hour and a half. There was the sound of wheels.

“That’s th’ doctor, Liza Ann.” There was no reply.

The old man fidgeted for fifteen minutes more; he had grown nervous. He slid out of the bed quietly and went to the barn.

“Thought I heard a noise,” he told himself by way of excuse for his action. “Wonder if Old Queen’s loose?” He felt his way along the manger carefully. Unaccustomed to midnight visitors, Queen snorted and shrank from his hand when he touched her.

“Whoa, there! You needn’t be so blamed ’fraid—nothin’s goin’ t’ hurt you. You ain’t a woman.”

Silas found a nail-keg and sat down on it across from the nibbling horses, and thought and waited.

“He’s there by this time,” he murmured presently. “Wisht they’d ’a’ sent for Liza Ann. No, I guess it’s better not. She wouldn’t know what t’ do, havin’ no experience.”

He debated with himself as to whether he should go back to bed or not.

“Couldn’t sleep,” he concluded. “Lord! how long the nights is when a feller’s awake!”

The horses ate on uninterruptedly and the soft breeze stole through the old barn, while everything in nature was indicative of peace except the old man, whose mind worked

relentlessly on the situation of the young wife whose certain suffering racked him almost as much as if he had stood in its presence.

"Gosh-a-livin's!" he exclaimed as a new thought struck him. "I wonder which one of 'em Jake got. Now that young Doc Stubbins ain't got no more sense 'n a louse. I ought t' 'a' told John an' I forgot. Lord! Lord! th' chances th' poor critters have t' take!"

Mrs. Chamberlain was awakened in the gray light of morning as her husband crept shivering into bed.

"Where you been?" she asked.

"Out t' th' barn. Heard a noise an' thought I'd better look into it," was Silas's reply.

As the sun rose the new life was ushered in. Doctor Morgan did not start home till after nine o'clock.

"Who is to have charge of your wife, Mr. Hunter?" he asked as he paused in the door and looked back at his patient anxiously. Seven miles was a long distance—and she might need him suddenly.

"Why, I thought Hepsie and I could care for her," John replied. Trained nurses were unheard of in those days.

"It simply cannot be," answered the old man. (Doctor Stubbins had not been engaged.) "Another attack like this last one would—well, you *must* have some one of experience here. It's a matter of life or death—at least it might be," he added under his breath. "Couldn't you stay?" he asked Susan Hornby, who sat with the baby on her knee. "The girl's liable to slip away from us before I could get here."

It was arranged that Aunt Susan should stay with the young mother, who was too weak to turn her head on the pillow it lay upon, for as the old doctor had said she was a desperately sick girl. They had but just kept her with them. The presence of Aunt Susan was almost as delightful to Elizabeth Hunter as the head of the child on her arm. Weak and exhausted, she was permitted such rest as she had not known in all the days of her married life. The darkened room and the quiet of the next three days were such a mercy to her tired nerves that she would have been glad to lie there for ages. Doctor Morgan let Susan Hornby return to her home and husband at the end of the week, confident that with care, Hepsie could perform the little offices required, but he was to learn that country people have little judgment in serious cases of illness, and that the young mother's room would be filled with company when he came out the next day.

Mr. and Mrs. Crane were the first to arrive on Sunday morning, and when John announced that they were driving up to the hitching post, Elizabeth begged weakly for him to say that she was too ill to see any one that day. John would have been glad to deliver that message, remembering the wedding day, but Sadie was with her mother, and John had found Luther a convenient neighbour of late.

"We can't offend them," he said.

"But I can't have them. Please, John—with my head aching already."

"Don't speak so loud," John said warningly.

Mrs. Farnshaw came and had to have her team tied to the barnyard fence. She walked to the house with the rest of the company, and even in their presence could not restrain her complaints because she had not been notified of her daughter's serious illness and the arrival of the child. Elizabeth's protest that they had been absorbed by that illness, and too busy to think of anything but the most urgent and immediate duties, did not quiet the objections, for Mrs. Farnshaw had the habit of weak insistence. Her mother's whine was never so hard to bear.

"Where's Mr. Farnshaw?" Mr. Crane asked. "He's grandpa now."

Elizabeth shrank into her pillows, and Mrs. Farnshaw bridled angrily.

"He's busy," was her tart reply.

"I should think he'd want t' see his grandson. Lizzie, you haven't showed me that boy," Mr. Crane insisted.

And Elizabeth, weak and worn, had to draw the sleeping child from under the quilts at her side and show him off as if he had been a roll of butter at a country fair, while constant reference was made to one phase or another of the unpleasant things in her experience. Her colour deepened and her head thumped more and more violently, and by noon when they trooped out to the dining room, where Hepsie had a good dinner waiting, the girl-wife was worn out. She could not eat the food brought to her, but drank constantly, and was unable to get a snatch of sleep before the visitors assembled about her bed again.

At four o'clock Doctor Morgan arrived and Luther Hansen came for Sadie. Sadie saw him drive in, and laughed unpleasantly.

"Luther wasn't a bit for comin', but I told him I'd come over with ma, an' he could come after me. He's always chicken-hearted, an' said since Lizzie was so sick we oughtn't t' come. I don't see as you're s' sick, Lizzie; you've got lots of good colour in your face, an' th' way you pull that baby around don't look much like you was goin' t' kick the bucket just yet."

Elizabeth made no reply, but watched John help Doctor Morgan tie his team.

“How’s Mrs. Hunter?” Doctor Morgan asked John as he came around to the gate after the horses were fastened.

“All right, I guess. She’s had a good deal of company to-day. I didn’t want them, but you can’t offend people.”

“We usually have a good deal of company at a funeral,” the old doctor said dryly, as he viewed the extra horses and wagons about the fence.

When he entered the sickroom his face hardened.

“I’m not as much afraid of your neighbours as you are, Mr. Hunter,” he said, and went to the middle door and beckoned Luther to come with him into the yard. A few words was all that was needed with Luther Hansen, and the doctor returned to his patient.

Sadie was more sarcastic than usual as they drove home.

“I wouldn’t ’a’ come if I’d a known I wasn’t wanted,” she remarked sulkily.

“But, Sadie, Doc Morgan says she’s worse! I’d turn ’em out quick enough if it was you.”

Poor little Sadie Hansen caught the spirit of the remark. Nothing like it had ever before been offered her in all her bitter, sensitive experience. She looked up at her husband mollified, and let even Elizabeth have a season of rest as she considered this astonishing thing which marriage had brought to her. 272

Susan Hornby, who had thought her darling resting on this quiet Sabbath day, was reëstablished at the bedside, and it was not till the morning of the tenth day that she again left the house. At the end of that time she was dismissed reluctantly by the good old doctor himself. It had been such a good excuse to be with Elizabeth that Aunt Susan had persuaded the long-suffering Nathan that her presence beside her was a thing not to be denied, and Nathan, glad to see Sue so happy, ate many a cold meal that haying season and did not complain. It was a great event in Susan Hornby’s life. Gentle and cordial to all, Susan Hornby lived much alone—alone most of all when surrounded with her neighbours. Elizabeth was her only real tie.

“Oh, child! I’m so glad you’ve got him,” she said one day as she laid the beautiful brown head on Elizabeth’s arm.

Elizabeth patted the hand that was drawing the little white shawl over the baby’s head. Master John Hunter—the babe had been named for its father—had had his daily bath, and robed in fresh garments, and being well fed and housed in the snuggest of all quarters, the little triangle made by a mother’s arm, settled himself for his daily nap, while the two women watched him with the eyes of affection. Never again do we so nearly attain perfect peace in this turbulent life as during those first few weeks when the untroubled serenity of human existence is infringed upon by nothing but a desire for nourishment, which is conveniently present, to be had at the first asking, and which there is such a heaven of delight in obtaining. We are told that we can only enter the Kingdom of Heaven by becoming as little children: no other Kingdom of Heaven is adequate after that. 273

The life in this little room had taken Susan Hornby back to her own youth, and as often as otherwise when Master John was being put through his daily ablutions it was the little Katie of long ago that she bathed and robed fresh and clean for the morning nap. At other times Elizabeth was her Katie grown older. It was the flowering time of Susan Hornby’s life. The fact that Elizabeth had never crossed her threshold since her marriage to John Hunter had faded out of Aunt Susan’s mind. Elizabeth’s every word and look spoke the affection she felt for her. Other people might sneer and doubt, but Susan Hornby accepted what her instincts told her was genuine.

Elizabeth got about the house slowly. The days in bed had been made tolerable by the presence of those she loved, but she was far from strong, and she looked forward with reluctance to the time when Aunt Susan would not be with her. John complained of Hepsie’s work only when with his wife alone, for Aunt Susan had been so constant in her praises that he would not start a discussion which he had found he brought out by such criticism. 274

Susan Hornby looked on, and was as much puzzled as ever about the relations of the young couple. Elizabeth was evidently anxious about John’s opinions, but she never by so much as a word indicated that they differed from hers. She spoke of him with all the glow of her early love; she pointed out his helpfulness as if he were the only man in the world who looked after the kitchen affairs with such exactitude; she would have the baby named for no one else, and all her life and thought centred around him in so evident a manner that Aunt Susan could not but feel that she was the happiest of wives. She talked of her ideals of harmony, of her thankfulness for the example of the older woman’s life with her husband, of her desire to pattern after that example, of everything that was good and hopeful in her life, with so much enthusiasm as to completely convince her friend that she had found a fitting abiding place. And, indeed, Elizabeth believed all that she said. Each mistake of their married life together had been put away as a mistake. Each day she began in firm faith in the possibility of bringing about necessary changes. If she failed, she was certain in her own mind that the failure had been due to some weakness of her own. Never did man have a more patient, trusting wife than John Hunter. There had been much company about the house of late, and there had been no difficulties. Elizabeth was not yet analytical enough to reason out that because of the presence of that company far less demand had been made upon her by her husband. She thought that they were really getting on better

than they had done, and told herself happily that it must be because she was more rested than she had been and was therefore not so annoyed by small things. It was ever Elizabeth's way to look for blame in herself. The baby was a great source of pleasure also. He was a good child and slept in the most healthy fashion, though beginning now when awake to look about him a little and try to associate himself with his surroundings. Elizabeth had begun to look forward to Silas's first visit with the child. Silas had quaint ways with the young, and it was with very real pleasure that she dragged herself to the door and admitted him the first week she was out of bed. Elizabeth led the old man to the lounge on tiptoe.

"I want you to see him, Mr. Chamberlain; you and he are to be great friends," she said as she went down on her knees and drew the white shawl reverently from the sleeping face. "Isn't he a fine, big fellow?" she asked, looking up at the old man.

"'E ought t' be, havin' you for his mother," Silas said with an attempt at being witty, and looking at the baby shyly.

The baby roused a little, and stretched and grunted, baby fashion.

"Lordie! what good sleep they do have!" Silas said, holding out his finger to the little red hand extended toward him, and then withdrawing it suddenly. "Now, Liza Ann sleeps just like that t' this day." He spoke hesitatingly, as if searching for a topic of conversation. "She does 'er work regular like, an' she sleeps as regular as she works. I often think what a satisfyin' sort of life she leads, anyhow. She tends t' 'er own business an' she don't tend t' nobody else's, an'—an'—she ain't got no more on 'er mind 'n that there baby."

Elizabeth gathered the child into her arms and seated herself in a rocking chair, while the old man sat stiffly down on the edge of the lounge and continued:

"Now I ain't that way, you know. I have a most uncomfortable way of gettin' mixed up in th' affairs of others."

"But it's always a friendly interest," Elizabeth interposed, mystified by his curious manner and rambling conversation.

Silas crossed his knees and, clasping his hands about the uppermost one, rocked back and forth on the edge of the lounge.

"Most allus," he admitted, "but not quite. Now I'm fair ready t' fight that new Mis Hansen. I've been right fond of Luther, for th' short time I've knowed 'im, but what he see in that there Sadie Crane's beyond me. *He's* square. He looks you in th' face 's open 's day when he talks t' you, an' you know th' ain't no lawyer's tricks in th' wordin' of it. But she's different. They was over t' our house Sunday 'fore last an' I never knowed Liza Ann t' be's near explodin' 's she was 'fore they left. It done me right smart good t' see 'er brace up an' defend 'erself. I tell you Mis Hansen see she'd riled a hornet 'fore she got away. Liza Ann 'll take an' take, till you hit 'er just right, an' then—oh, my!"

Silas ended with a chuckle.

"After they left, she just told me I could exchange works with somebody else; she wasn't goin' t' have that woman comin' t' our house no more."

"Sadie is awfully provoking," Elizabeth admitted, "but—but—Luther likes her, and Luther is a good judge of people, I always thought."

"Yep," Silas admitted in return, "an' I don't understand it. Anyhow, I never knew Liza Ann come s' near forgettin' 'erself. It was worth a day's travel t' see."

They talked of other things, the baby dropped asleep in its mother's arms, and Silas took his departure.

"How unlike him," Elizabeth said to herself as she watched him go to his wagon.

Silas rode away in an ill-humour with himself.

"Now there I've been an' talked like a lunatic asylum," he meditated. "I allus was that crazy about babies! Here I've gone an' talked spiteful about th' neighbours, an' told things that hadn't ought t' be told. If I'd a talked about that baby, I'd 'a' let 'er see I was plum foolish about it—an' I couldn't think of a blessed thing but th' Hansens."

He rode for a while with a dissatisfied air which gave way to a look of yearning.

"My! How proud a man ought t' be! How little folks knows what they've got t' be thankful for! Now I'll bet 'e just takes it as a matter of course, an' never stops t' think whether other folks is as lucky or not. She don't. She's in such a heaven of delight, she don't care if she has lost 'er purty colour, or jumped into a life that'll make an ol' woman of 'er 'fore she's hardly begun t' be a girl, nor nothin'. She's just livin' in that little un, an' don't even know that can't last long."

There was a long pause, and then he broke out again.

"Think of a man havin' all that, an' not knowin' th' worth of it! Lord! If I'd 'a' had—but there now, Liza Ann wouldn't want me t' mourn over it—not bein' 'er fault exactly. Guess I ought t' be patient; but I would 'a' liked a little feller."

When John came home that night Elizabeth told him of Silas's visit.

"He hardly looked at baby at all," she said disappointedly, "and I'd counted on his cunning ways with it more than anybody's. I thought he'd be real pleased with it, and instead of that, he didn't

seem interested in it at all, and sat and stared at me and talked about Sadie. I thought sure he'd want to hold it—he's got such cute ways."

"How could you expect an old fellow like him to care for babies?" John said, smiling at the thought of it. "A man has to experience such things to know what they mean."

He took the child from her arms and sat down to rock it while he waited for the supper to be put on the table.

"Say," he began, "I saw Hepsie setting the sponge for to-morrow's bread as I came through the kitchen. I'll take care of baby, and you go and see about it. The bread hasn't been up to standard since you've been sick. You'll have to look after things a little closer now that you are up again." 279

Elizabeth, whose back was not strong, had been sitting on the lounge, and now dropped into a reclining position as she replied:

"The bread has not been bad, John. Aunt Susan was always marvelling at how good it was compared to the usual hired girl's bread."

"It was pretty badly burned last time," John observed dryly.

"That didn't happen in the sponge, dear, and anybody burns the bread sometimes," she returned; "besides that, it makes my back ache to stir things these days."

John Hunter did not reply, but every line of him showed his displeasure. It was not possible to go on talking about anything else while he was annoyed, and the girl began to feel she was not only lazy but easily irritated about a very small thing. Reflecting that her back would quit hurting if she rested afterward, she arose from the lounge and dragged herself to the kitchen, where she stirred the heavy sponge batter as she was bidden.

Mrs. Hunter was expected to return in a little over a week, and the first days when Elizabeth was able to begin to do small things about the house were spent in getting the house cleaning done and the entire place in order for her coming. It happened that a light frost fell upon Kansas that year weeks before they were accustomed to look for it; and the tomato vines were bitten. It was necessary to can quickly such as could be saved. In those days all the fruit and vegetables used on Kansas farms were "put up" at home, and Elizabeth, with two, and sometimes more, hired men to cook for, was obliged to have her pantry shelves well stocked. The heat of the great range and the hurry of the extra work flushed the pale face and made deep circles below her eyes, but Elizabeth's pride in her table kept her at her post till the canning was done. By Saturday night the tomatoes were all "up," and the carpets upstairs had been beaten and retacked. Mrs. Hunter's room had been given the most exact care and was immaculate with tidies and pillow-shams, ironed by Elizabeth's own hands, and the chickens to be served on the occasion of her arrival were "cut up" and ready for the frying pan. 280

Sunday there was a repast fit for a king when John and his mother came from town. Every nerve in Elizabeth's body had been stretched to the limit in the production of that meal. Too tired to eat herself, the young wife sat with her baby in her arms and watched the hungry family devour the faultless repast. She might be tired, but the dinner was a success. The next morning, when the usual rising hour of half-past four o'clock came, it seemed to the weary girl that she could not drag herself up to superintend the getting of the breakfast.

"Mother'll help you with the morning work and you can lie down afterward," John assured her when she expressed a half determination not to rise.

But after breakfast Mrs. Hunter suggested that they scour the tinware, and the three women put in the spare time of the entire morning polishing and rubbing pans and lids. As they worked, Mrs. Hunter discussed tinware, till not even the shininess of the pans upon which they worked could cover the disappointment of the girl that her mother-in-law should have discovered it in such a neglected condition. 281

"Really, child, it isn't fit to put milk in again till it's in better condition. How did you happen to let it get so dull and rusty?"

"Now, mother, it isn't rusty at all. It is pretty dull, but that's not Hepsie's fault. It was as bright as a pin when I got up, but we've had the tomatoes to put up and the housecleaning to do and it couldn't be helped," Elizabeth replied, covering up any share the girl might have had in the matter. She knew the extra work which had fallen on Hepsie's shoulders in those last weeks, and particularly since she herself had been out of bed, for the girl loved Elizabeth and had shielded her by extra steps many times when her own limbs must have ached with weariness.

"You don't mean to say you used the tin pans for any thing as corroding as tomatoes!" Mrs. Hunter exclaimed in astonishment.

"We used everything in sight I think—and then didn't have enough," Elizabeth said with a laugh.

"But you should never use your milk pans for anything but milk, dear," the older woman remonstrated. "You know milk takes up everything that comes its way, and typhoid comes from milk oftener than any other source." 282

"There are no typhoids in tomatoes fresh from the vine," Elizabeth replied testily, and Mrs. Hunter dropped the subject.

But though she dropped the subject she did not let the pans drop till the last one shone like a mirror. With the large number of cows they were milking many receptacles were needed and John had got those pans because they were lighter to handle than the heavy stone crocks used

by most farmers' wives. Elizabeth was more appreciative, of those pans than any purchase which had been made for her benefit in all the months she had served as John's housekeeper, but by the time she was through scouring she was ready to throw them at any one who was foolish enough to address her upon housekeeping; besides, she plainly discerned the marks of discontent upon Hepsie's face. Hepsie was a faithful servitor, but she had learned by several years of service to stop before her energies were exhausted. It was the first sign of dissatisfaction she had ever shown, and Elizabeth was concerned.

The next morning Elizabeth's head was one solid, throbbing globe of roar and pain. Mrs. Hunter brought her a dainty breakfast which it was impossible for her to eat, and said with genuine affection:

"We have let you do too much, my dear, and I mean to take some of this burden off of your shoulders. You're not yourself yet. John tells me you were sicker than people usually are at such times. I ought to have helped the girl with that tinware yesterday and sent you to bed."

Elizabeth listened with some alarm to the proposition of Mrs. Hunter taking the house into her own hands, but she was touched by the real sympathy and concern evident.

"It's good of you, mother. You'll have to be careful about Hepsie, though. You must not call her 'the girl' where she hears you. You see she is one of our old neighbours, and—and—well, they hate to be called that—and they aren't exactly servants."

"Well, I'll get the dinner for her—it's wash day. Don't try to get up," Mrs. Hunter said, taking the breakfast away with her.

"Be careful about Hepsie, mother," Elizabeth called after her in an undertone. "She's a good girl, if you understand her and—and they leave you at the drop of a hat."

Hepsie's going came sooner than even Elizabeth had feared. She brought a cup of coffee to her at noon, but avoided conversation and went out at once.

Elizabeth called her mother-in-law to her after dinner was over and cautioned her afresh.

"But I haven't had a word with her that was ill-natured or cross," Mrs. Hunter protested indignantly.

"I don't suppose you have, mother," the miserable girl replied, puzzled as to how she was to make the older woman understand. "It's—it's a way you have. I saw that she was hurt about that tinware. She's been very satisfactory, really. She takes every step off of me that she can. She's the best in the country—and—and they hang together too. If we lost her, we'd have a hard time getting another."

"Well, it makes me cross to have to work with them as if they were rotten eggs and we were afraid of breaking one, but if I have it to do I suppose I can. I only looked after the clothes to see that she got the streaks out of them. I knew she was mad about something, but I rinsed them myself; I always do that."

After Mrs. Hunter was gone Elizabeth thought the matter over seriously. Neither Hepsie nor any other girl they could get in that country was going to have her work inspected as if she were a slave. They were free-born American women, ignorant of many things regarding the finer kinds of housekeeping in most instances, but independent from birth and surroundings. In fact, there was a peculiar swagger of independence which bordered upon insolence in most of the homes from which Kansas help must be drawn. Elizabeth knew that their dignity once insulted they could not be held to any contract.

Mrs. Hunter went back to the kitchen and tried to redeem the mistakes she had made, but Hepsie would not be cajoled and the unpleasantness grew. Saturday night the girl came to Elizabeth and said, without looking her in the face at all:

"Jake says, if he can have th' team, he'll take me home. I—I think I won't stay any longer."

"Do you have to go, Hepsie?" Elizabeth said, her face troubled.

Hepsie avoided her glance because she knew the trouble was there. Hepsie had been very happy in this house and had been proud of a chance to keep its well supplied shelves in satisfactory condition. Gossip hovered over whatever went on in the Hunter home, and there was a distinction in being associated with it; also Hepsie had come to love Elizabeth more than she usually did her country mistresses. She saw that all the unkind things which were being said about Elizabeth's stuck-up propensities were untrue, and that Elizabeth Hunter was as sensible and kindly as could be wished when people understood her.

"I'll be up and around hereafter," Elizabeth continued. "You don't understand mother. She's all right, only she isn't used to the farm."

"I guess I understand 'er all right," Hepsie said sullenly; "'t wouldn't make no difference, you bein' up. She'd be a-tellin' me what t' do just th' same, an' I'm tired enough, washdays, without havin' somebody t' aggravate me about every piece that goes through th' rench."

She stood waiting for Elizabeth to speak, and when she did not, added resentfully:

"You an' me always got along. We had a clean house, too, if Mr. Hunter didn't think I knew much."

Elizabeth's surprise was complete. She had not supposed the girl knew John's estimate of her work. John was usually so clever about keeping out of sight when he insisted upon anything unpleasant that it had never occurred to Elizabeth that Hepsie was aware that John insisted

upon having her do things which he felt that Hepsie could not be trusted to do unwatched. There was nothing more to be said. She reckoned the girl's wages, and told her that Jake could have the team.

Before Hepsie went that night, she came back to the bedroom and cuddled the baby tenderly.

"I'm—I'm sorry t' go an' leave you with th' baby so little, Lizzie. 'Taint hardly fair, but—but if you worked out a while you'd learn t' quit 'fore you was wore out." She stood thinking a moment, and then cautioned Elizabeth sincerely: "I'm goin' t' say one thing 'fore I leave: you'd better ship that old woman 'fore you try t' get another girl around these parts. I'll be asked why I left an'—an' I'll have t' tell, or git folks t' thinkin' I'm lazy an' you won't have me."

Elizabeth's heart sank. She would not plead for the girl to keep still. It would have been of no use; besides, her own sense of fairness told her that there was room for all that had been hinted at.

Monday John spent the day looking for a girl to take Hepsie's place. Tired and discouraged, he came home about four o'clock in the afternoon.

"Could you get me a bite to eat?" he asked Elizabeth as he came in. "I haven't had a bite since breakfast."

Elizabeth laid the baby on the bed, and turned patiently toward the kitchen. An hour was consumed in getting the extra meal and doing the dishes afterward, and then it was time to begin the regular supper for the rest of the family. When John found that she had thrown herself 287
down on the bed to nurse the baby instead of coming to the table for her supper, he insisted that she at least come and pour the tea, and when she sat unresistant through the meal, but could not eat, he sent her to bed and helped his mother wash the supper dishes without complaint. The next morning, however, he hailed her forth to assist with the half-past four o'clock breakfast relentlessly, unaware that she had spent a weary and sleepless night.

"Are you going to look for a girl to-day?" she asked as he was leaving the house after the breakfast was eaten.

"Oh! I suppose so, but I haven't much hopes of getting one," he answered impatiently. Then seeing the tears in her eyes at the thought of the washing waiting to be done, he kissed her tenderly. "I'll do the best I can, dear; I know you're tired."

"Well, the next one I get I hope mother 'll let me manage her. If Hepsie wouldn't stand her ways of talking about things none of the rest will." After a moment's reflection she added: "I cannot do all this work myself. I'm so tired I'm ready to die."

John slipped his arm about her and said earnestly:

"I'll do all I can to help you with the dinner dishes, but you are not to say one word to mother about this."

It was gently put, but authoritative.

"Then you needn't look for one at all," she said sharply.

John's arm fell from about her and he looked at her in cold astonishment. 288

"I don't care," she insisted. "I can't keep a girl and have mother looking over every piece of washing that is hung on the line."

"Mother kept girls a long time in her own house," he answered, taking offence at once.

"I don't care; she dealt with a different kind of girls." Then with a sudden illumination, she added: "She didn't have such quantities of work to do, either. If we go on this way we'll have to have help and keep it or we'll have to cut down the farm work." She brightened with the thought. "Let's cut the work down anyhow, dear. I'd have so much an easier time and—and you wouldn't have all those wages to raise every month, and we could live so much more comfortably."

She leaned forward eagerly.

"I don't see but we're living as comfortably as folks usually do," John replied evasively.

"I know, dear, but we have to have the men at meals all the time and—and——"

"Now see here, Elizabeth, don't go and get foolish. A man has to make a living," John said fretfully.

The girl had worked uncomplainingly until her last remnant of strength was gone, and they were neither willing to do the thing which made it possible to keep help, nor to let her do the work as she was able to do it. With it all, however, she tried patiently to explain and arrange. Something had to be done.

"I know you have to make a living, John, and I often think that I must let you do it in your own way, but there are so many things that are getting into a snarl while we try it this way. We don't 289
have much home with strangers at our table every day in the year. We never have a meal alone. I wouldn't mind that, but it makes more work than I am able to do, it is getting you into debt deeper every month to pay their wages, and you don't know how hard it is going to be to pay those debts a few years from now. But that isn't the worst of it as far as I am concerned. I work all the time and you—you aren't satisfied with what I do when I do everything my strength will let me do. I can't do any more than I'm doing either."

“I *am* satisfied with what you do,” he said with evident annoyance at having his actions and words remarked upon. “Besides, you have mother to help you.” He had ignored her remarks upon the question of debts, determined to fasten the attention elsewhere.

The little ruse succeeded, for Elizabeth’s attention was instantly riveted upon her own hopeless situation.

“It isn’t much help to run the girl out and then make it so hard to get another one,” she said bitterly.

Instantly she wished she had not said it. It was true, but she wished she could have held it back. John did not realize as she did how hard it was going to be to get another girl. She had not told him of Hepsie’s remarks nor of her advice. Elizabeth was not a woman to tattle, and the “old woman” Hepsie had referred to was his mother.

“Don’t think I’m hard on her, John. If we could only get another girl I wouldn’t care.” 290

She waited for him to speak, and, when he did not do so, asked hopelessly:

“Don’t you think we can get another girl pretty soon if we go a good ways off from this neighbourhood?”

“I don’t know anything about it, and I don’t want to hear anything more about it either,” was the ungracious reply.

“I am in the wrong. You will hear no more on either subject.”

The tone was earnest. Elizabeth meant what she said. John went from the house without the customary good-bye kiss. We live and learn, and we learn most when we get ourselves thoroughly in the wrong.

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CHAPTER XIII

“ENNOBLED BY THE REFLECTED STORY OF ANOTHER’S GOODNESS AND LOVE”

It was on a Saturday, three weeks after Mrs. Hunter’s return, that Elizabeth asked to make her first visit with the baby.

“Aunt Susan was here so much while I was sick, John, that I feel that we must go to see them to-morrow.”

“Oh, my goodness!” John replied, stepping to the cupboard to put away the pile of plates in his hands. “I’m tired enough to stay at home.”

They had just finished washing the supper dishes together, and Elizabeth considered as she emptied the dishpan and put it away. She had been refused so often that she rather expected it, and yet she had thought by the cordiality with which John had always treated Aunt Susan that he would be reasonable about this visit now that she was able, and the baby old enough to go out.

Elizabeth was never clear about a difficulty, nor had her defences well in hand upon the first occasion. With those she loved, and with John in particular, any offence had to be repeated over and over again before she could protect herself. She felt her way slowly and tried to preserve her ideals; she tried to be fair. She could not tell quickly what to do about a situation; she took a 292
long time to get at her own attitudes and understand them, and it took her still longer to get at the real intentions of others. As she brought out her cold-boiled potatoes and began to peel them for breakfast, she reflected that Aunt Susan had come as regularly to see them as if she had always been well treated, until Mrs. Hunter’s coming. At that point the visits had dropped off.

“Baby is nearly three months old, and I promised Aunt Susan that I’d take him to see her the first place I took him. We owe it to her, and I’m not going to neglect her any more. We can leave a dinner of cold chicken and pies for the men, and I’ll get a hot supper for them when I come home. I’d like to start about ten o’clock.”

It sounded so much as if it were all settled that the girl felt that it really was.

“That leaves mother here alone all day, and I’m not going to do it,” John returned with equal assurance.

“Mother can go with us. I should want her to do that, and I’m sure Aunt Susan would.”

Mrs. Hunter was passing through the room with the broom and dustpan and paused long enough to say pleasantly:

“Don’t count on me, children. I’ll take care of myself and get the men a hot dinner besides. I’d just as soon.”

“We’d like to have you go, mother, and I’m sure Aunt Susan would want us to bring you,” Elizabeth replied with a little catch in her breath. If Mrs. Hunter refused to go, John would not take her if she begged on her knees.

“No, I don’t want to go. I’ll get the dinner though, and you needn’t hurry back.” She went on upstairs contentedly and with the feeling that she had arranged the matter to everybody’s liking.

“Let her get the dinner then,” Elizabeth said, exasperated. “I’ll leave everything ready for it.”

“I shall not go and leave her alone all day. She has a hard enough time out on this farm without getting the feeling that we care as little as that for her comfort. Besides that, the buggy is not mended yet.”

“We can go in the lumber wagon. We didn’t have a buggy till long after we were engaged,” Elizabeth said, not going into the matter of leaving his mother at home, which she knew would be useless.

“I should think you’d want to rest when you did get a chance. You talk all the time about having too much to do,” John replied evasively.

“I wouldn’t get any rest,” Elizabeth replied quickly. “I’d get a dinner—that’s what I’d have to do if I stayed at home. I’d be on my feet three solid hours and then have to nurse the baby. That’s the rest I’d have.”

“The devil!” was the answer she got as John went out.

The weeks flew past, and still Elizabeth served hot dinners and mourned in secret over Susan Hornby’s neglected kindness. Aunt Susan had been cheerful as well as discreet during those weeks when she had helped them. She had been so happy over the evident friendliness of John Hunter that she had felt sure that the old cordiality was to be resumed.

After what seemed to Elizabeth endless weeks, a curious circumstance aided her in getting to Aunt Susan’s in the end. Mrs. Hunter, who was not greatly concerned about her disappointment, heard constant reference to Mrs. Hornby’s assistance at the time of the baby’s coming, and knowing that there would be discussion of their neglect to her in the neighbourhood, joined authoritatively in Elizabeth’s entreaty the next time it was mentioned, thereby accomplishing through fear of gossip a thing which no amount of coaxing on Elizabeth’s part could ever have done, and at last the trip was to be made.

Susan Hornby’s home was so unchanged in the year that Elizabeth had been gone that, but for the baby in her arms, she could hardly have realized that she had been away. Aunt Susan sent her to the bedroom with the wraps when they were taken off. It was the same little room the girl had occupied for half that year, the same rag carpet, the same mended rocking chair which had come to grief in the cyclone, and the knitted tidy which the girl herself had made. With the hot tears running down her cheeks the girl-mother threw herself upon the bed and buried her face in the baby’s wraps to stifle the cry she was afraid would escape her. In the sanctuary of her girlhood’s highest hopes, Elizabeth sobbed out her disappointments and acknowledged to herself that life had tricked her into a sorry network of doubts and unsettled mysteries. For the first time she sunk her pride and let Susan think what she would of her prolonged absence, and went openly to the kitchen to bathe her face in Nathan’s familiar tin basin. A sudden suspicion of John’s reception at Nathan’s hands made it possible to go back to Aunt Susan with a smile on her lips.

Indeed, Elizabeth’s suspicions were so far true that they were a certainty. Nathan, by Luther’s marriage to a woman the old man suspected of every evil, had cut himself off from every friend. Nathan had been thrown in upon himself and had pondered and nursed his suspicions of all men, and of John Hunter in particular. He finished the milking without offering to go into the house; and John, who had insisted upon coming at night instead of on a Sunday, was obliged to stand around the cow stable and wait, or go to the house alone. He chose the former course and was made happy by the arrival of Jake, who had not known where his employer was going when his team was hitched to the wagon.

“I’ve just been over to Luther’s, Mrs. Hornby,” Jake said when they finally stood around Aunt Susan’s fire. “Did you know Sadie was sick? Luther’s awful good to ’er, but I know she’d be glad t’ see a woman body about once in a while.”

“Wisht she’d die an’ get out of th’ way,” Nathan Hornby said bitterly. “A body could see Luther once in a while then ’thout havin’ ’is words cut up an’ pasted together some new way for passin’ round.”

No one spoke, and Nathan felt called upon to defend his words.

“I don’t care! It’s a God’s pity t’ have a woman like that carry off th’ best man this country’s ever had, an’ then fix up every word ’is friends says t’ him so’s t’ make trouble.”

Nathan’s whole bitter longing for companionship was laid bare. Elizabeth’s eyes filled with tears; Elizabeth was lonely also.

The call was a short one. John moved early to go home and there was nothing to do but give way. It was not till the next day that Elizabeth suspected that Nathan’s remarks had offended John Hunter, and then in spite of her eagerness to keep the peace between the two men, she laughed aloud. She was also somewhat amused at the insistence on a call upon Sadie which John wanted that she should make. The perfect frankness of his announcement that Luther was

a convenient neighbour, and that they must pay neighbourly attention to illness, when he had never encouraged her to go for any other reason, was a new viewpoint from which the young wife could observe the workings of his mind. Something about it subtracted from her faith in him, and in life.

While she was still washing the dinner dishes John came in to discuss the visit. Elizabeth was athrob with the weariness of a half day spent at the ironing table, and to avoid dressing the baby had asked Mrs. Hunter to take care of him.

With no other visible reason but his customary obstinacy, John insisted upon the child being taken.

"I've got to get back early and get the coloured clothes folded down. Every one of the boys had a white shirt and two or three collars this week, so I asked mother to keep him for me," Elizabeth said. 297

"Now see here," John argued. "Mother 'll fold those clothes and you can just as well take him along and make a decent visit. They're the nicest people in the country, according to some of the neighbours."

Elizabeth's laugh nettled her husband. When he appeared with the wagon, she was ready, with the baby in her arms.

The wind was keen and cold, the laprobes flew and fluttered in derisive refusal to be tucked in.

"Take the buggy in and have it mended the next time you go to town," she said, with her teeth chattering, as they drew near to Luther's home. "I want to go up to see ma before long and it's almost impossible to keep a baby covered on this high seat." She thought a while and then added, "I haven't been home since I was married."

"I shouldn't think you'd ever want to go," John replied ungraciously.

Tears of anger as well as mortification filled her eyes, and her throat would not work. It was to stop gossip as much as to see her mother that the girl desired to make the visit. The world was right: John was not proud of her.

The sight of the "shanty" as they turned the corner near Luther's place brought a new train of thought. Dear, kindly, sweet-souled Luther! The world disapproved of his marriage too. He was coming toward them now, his ragged overcoat blowing about him as he jumped over the ridges made by the plow in turning out the late potatoes he had been digging. 298

"You carry the baby in for Lizzie, an' I'll tie these horses," he said, beaming with cordiality. "Got caught with Sadie's sickness an' let half th' potatoes freeze 's hard 's brickbats."

It was so cold that Elizabeth did not stand to ask about Sadie, but turned to the house to escape the blast.

"I'll come for you at five if I can get back. I'm going over to see about some calves at Warren's," John said as they went up the path.

"Is that why you insisted that I bring the baby? You needn't have been afraid to tell me; you do as you please anyhow."

"H-s-sh! Here comes Hansen," John Hunter said warningly, and turned back to the wagon, giving the child into Luther's arms at the door.

Luther Hansen cuddled the child warmly to him and without waiting to go in the house raised the white shawl from its sleeping face for a peep at it.

"We lost ours," he said simply.

The house sheltered them from the wind, and Elizabeth stopped and looked up at him in astonishment.

"You don't mean it? I—I didn't know you were expecting a child, Luther. I'm so sorry. I wish I'd known."

The expression of sympathy escaped her unconsciously. Elizabeth would always want to know of Luther's joys and sorrows. 299

A glad little light softened the pain in his face, and he looked at her with a steady gaze, discerning the feeling of sound friendship behind the words.

"I believe you are," he said, expressing the confirmation of a thing he had never doubted. "I ain't askin' you any questions, Lizzie, I just know—that's all."

With something like a glow about his heart, he opened the door of his simple dwelling. He had never doubted her, nor believed the nonsense he had heard about her, but he had just had his faith refreshed. He carried the baby to the one little bedroom of his house, scuffing a wooden rocking chair behind him across the rough floor. He established Elizabeth in it beside Sadie, and then placing the sleeping child in its mother's arms went back to the potato field, hurrying his work to finish before dark. He understood in a measure why this was Elizabeth's first visit to them, and he did not resent it. Luther never resented. He lived his own kindly, industrious life. If people did not like Sadie he accepted it as a fact, but not as a thing to be aggrieved about. He could wait for Sadie to grow, and others must wait also. In the meantime, Luther watched Elizabeth and desired growth for her; her smallest movement was of interest to him. Elizabeth as a mother was a new feature. He remembered the deft way she had nestled the baby to her as he had relinquished it a few moments before, and thought with a sigh, of the cowhide-covered

trunk filled with little garments under the bed by which she sat. Not even Sadie knew what the loss of that first child meant to Luther. A new love for women's ways with babies grew up in him as he thought of Elizabeth's cuddling.

In the house, Elizabeth was getting into touch with the young mother who was childless. Sadie, in spite of a determination not to do so, was warming to that touch reluctantly. After all, it was pleasant to be telling Elizabeth about it, and to have her asking as if she wanted to know.

"Yes—I took bad about a week ago," she was saying. "I'd been kind of miserable for several days. I got a fall that last rain we had, an' I didn't seem t' get over it."

"I'd have come sooner if I'd known it," Elizabeth said, thinking of Luther's acceptance of a similar statement. "Jake didn't even tell us last night what was the matter."

"I guess he didn't know. Would you 'a' come if you'd 'a' known, Lizzie?" Before Elizabeth could reply, she continued, "Ma used t' think it'd be kind o' nice for me t' live close t' you, but I knew you wouldn't never come t' see me. I used t' be kind o' jealous cause Luther liked you s' much. I said everything mean I could think of about you, t' him—but law! Luther ain't got no pride. He don't care. He defends you from everybody, whether you come t' see us 'r not."

It was a curious little confession and one Sadie had not intended to make. Something big and sweet in Elizabeth had forced it from her. It embarrassed Elizabeth Hunter, and it held things which could not be discussed, and she turned the subject without answering.

"When did you lose the baby?"

"Oh, it only lived a couple of hours. You see it was too soon an'—an' it wasn't right. Th' doctor didn't expect it t' live as long as it did, but Luther would have it that it could, an' kept 'em a tryin' everything that could be thought of."

Sadie's voice died away gradually and she lay looking out of the window retrospectively: the last two weeks had brought food for much thinking.

"I didn't know, Lizzie, that a man could be as good as Luther. I'd always kind o' hated men, an' I thought I'd have t' fight my way through, like th' rest of th' women, an'—an'—he's that good an' thoughtful of me, an' of everybody else, that I'm clean ashamed of myself half th' time. He nearly had a fit when' he found out that I'd slipped with that wood. 'Twas ironing day, an' th' box got empty—an' then, when th' baby died, it just seemed as if he couldn't stand it."

She looked up at Elizabeth earnestly: "I never heard any one but th' preacher pray out loud, Lizzie, an'—an'—somehow—well," she stumbled, "Luther prayed so sweet, when he see it was gone—I—I ain't thought of much else since. It—it seemed like th' baby'd done something good t' both of us."

The spiteful, pettish face was for the moment ennobled by the reflected glory of another's goodness and love. Elizabeth caught a glimpse of a condition which makes heaven here upon earth. There was the harmony here in the "shanty" such as she coveted and strove in vain to establish in her own home. Of course there would be harmony where Luther Hansen was concerned: Luther *was* harmony. Ignoring his part in the little drama, she was wise enough to touch the other side of the story in her reply.

"These little ones bring blessings all their own, Sadie," she said, giving the hand on the patchwork quilt a little squeeze.

There was that in the impulsive little touch which was to be a lasting reminder to Sadie Hansen that Elizabeth Hunter responded to the things which were making of her life a different story. They had found common ground, where neither scoffed at the other.

"Did your baby make you feel that way?" she asked earnestly.

When Luther came at five o'clock to say that John was waiting he found them, at peace, with the baby between them.

Luther tucked Elizabeth and her child into the unprotected wagon seat with concern.

"This wind's a tartar. Pull th' covers down tight over its face, Lizzie. What's become of th' buggy, Hunter?"

Luther saw Elizabeth's face harden in a sudden contraction of pain, and glanced across at John, but whatever there was about it that hurt belonged to Elizabeth alone, for John Hunter pulled at the flapping laprobes without seeming to have heard clearly and evidently thinking that the remark was addressed to his wife. Dusk was falling, and Luther watched them drive away with a premonition of trouble as the night seemed to close in about them. He turned his back to the wind and stood humped over, peering through the evening at their disappearing forms. He saw Elizabeth snatch at the corner of the robe as they turned into the main road, and dug his own hands deeper into his pockets with his attention turned from Elizabeth and her possible trouble to that of the child.

"Hope th' little feller don't ketch cold." He turned to the house filled with his vision of a baby being cuddled close in a mother's arms, and with a new understanding of the comfort of such cuddling. His breath flew before him in a frosty stream when he entered the kitchen, and he hastened to build a fire and set the teakettle on to heat. He lighted a lamp and set it on a chair, and also stirred the fire in the little stove in Sadie's room before he went to milk.

"Wisht Lizzie'd come oftener. Wonder why she don't. She don't seem near as stuck-up as she

used to. Say, Luther, Lizzie told me th' queerest thing: she says th' way a mother feels before a baby's born makes a difference. She says if a woman's mean before a child comes It'll make th' young one mean too. She told a lot of things that showed it's true, about folks we know? I wonder how she learns everything? Ain't she smart! I wisht she'd come oftener. Say, if I ever get that way again——" The sentence was unfinished.

"Wisht ours 'd 'a' lived," Luther said longingly.

"Did Lizzie's baby make you feel that way too?"

Luther went to milk with a song in his heart. The little word "too" told more than all the discussions they had ever had. Sadie had not been pleased about the coming of the child they had lost. 304

"If I could get 'em together more," he said wistfully. "It was a good thing t' have 'er see Lizzie an' 'er baby together. I hope th' little Tad don't ketch cold. That laprobe didn't stay tucked in very well."

As he rose from milking the last cow, his mind went back to his visitors.

"Somethin' hurt Lizzie about th' buggy 'r somethin'—she's too peaked for her, too."

Luther's premonitions about the Hunter baby were only too well founded. The cold was not serious, but there was a frightened skirmish for hot water and lubricants before morning. The hoarse little cough gave way under the treatment, but the first baby's first cold is always a thing of grave importance to inexperienced parents, and Elizabeth knew that her chances of getting to go home, or any other place, that winter, were lessened. Her growing fear of neighbourhood criticism outgrew her fear of refusal, however, and at the end of the next week she reminded her husband that she had planned to take the child to see her mother.

"You may be willing to take that child out again; I'm not," he replied severely.

A bright idea struck Elizabeth's imagination after she had gone to bed that night. Why not ask her own family, the Chamberlains, Aunt Susan's, and Luther Hansen's to a Thanksgiving dinner? She was so elated by the idea that she could hardly get to sleep at all, and before she could settle herself to rest she had killed in her imagination the half dozen or more turkeys she had raised that season. A big dinner given to those who could act as mouthpieces would silence a lot of talk; also, it would take away a certain questioning look the girl feared in Luther's and Aunt Susan's eyes. The latter was the sorest point of her married life, and the conviction that they were thinking much worse things than were true did not make her any more comfortable. All Sunday she planned, and Sunday night went to bed with the first secret thought she had ever harboured from her husband's knowledge. 305

Mrs. Hunter entered into the plan with zest when on Monday afternoon it became necessary to tell her. She had begun to love her son's wife in spite of her family history. Had Elizabeth known how to manage it she could have made of John's mother a comfortable ally, but Elizabeth, with characteristic straightforwardness, sought no alliance except the natural one with her husband. The two women planned the articles to be served in the dinner, and then turned to the discussion of other preparations about the house. Elizabeth was proud of the home of which she was a part, but her strength was limited since baby's coming, and after looking about her critically decided that there would be no necessity for any more cleaning than the regular weekly amount.

"We'll have to get the cleaning done on Wednesday instead of Friday, but I think that will be all that will be needed. The carpets were put down fresh the week before you came home, and I don't intend to take them up again till spring." 306

"I think so," Mrs. Hunter agreed, "but You'll have to have the curtains in the dining room washed, and the tidies and pillow-shams done up fresh."

"Now, mother!" Elizabeth exclaimed, "don't begin to lay out work I can't get done. The tidies are not hard, and I could do the shams, but those curtains are not to be thought of. I'd be so tired if I had to go to work and wash all that, after the washing I put on the line to-day, that I just wouldn't be able to get the dinner on the table Thursday. Talking about the dinner, I think we'd better have two turkeys. I can roast two by putting them in the one big pan."

Mrs. Hunter was willing that the younger woman should prove her talent as a cook, but she planned to take some of the necessary things upon her own shoulders, and to take her son into her schemes for brightening things up a bit. Accordingly, the next morning she asked John to help her take the curtains down.

Elizabeth had been so full of her own plans that she had forgotten to tell John's mother that she intended to keep them secret till she had all her preparations made. The next morning when she heard the thud of some one stepping down from a chair, and her husband say: "There you are! How do you happen to be taking the curtains down at this time of the week?" she realized as she had never done before how much afraid of him she really was, for her pulses bounded, and her ears boomed like cannon, long before John had time to appear in the door to inquire who was coming, and why they were to do so. 307

With a look very much like guilt, Elizabeth told over the names of her proposed guests, but with Mrs. Hunter in the next room she could not tell him why it meant so much to her to ask these people to dine with them.

The customary protest was offered without delay.

“I don’t believe I’d do it, dear. Thanksgiving is a day for home folks, not neighbours, and, besides, see all the work it will make.”

“The work is just what we choose to make it. If I’d known mother was going to clean house I wouldn’t have said anything about it,” Elizabeth answered sullenly.

“Sh!” John Hunter said in a low tone and with a look of anger that was direct and full of meaning.

Elizabeth was ready to cry. She was angry. In every move she made she was checkmated; not because it was not a good move, but because it was hers. She could readily have given up any one thing as it came along, but the true meaning and spirit of these interferences were beginning to dawn upon her. However, once more she yielded to the unreasonable wishes of her husband and the dinner was given up. She made no attempt to finish the mincemeat they had planned to chop after dinner, but after putting the baby to sleep threw a shawl about her and slipping out of the house ran to the barn and down the creek in the pasture while John was helping his mother rehang the freshly ironed curtains.

They were only having two meals a day now that the corn was all picked, and dinner came so late in the afternoon that there was already a blaze of sunset colour in the west as she passed around the barn and started down the bank of the stream. The sun had set, but was still reflected on the heaps of billowy gray clouds just above the horizon. It made the snow in front of her a delicate pink. The girl had not got far enough from the house to see a sunset for months. The freshness and keenness of the air, the colours in the sky, the grandeur and sublimity of it all chased away her anger and left her in a mood to reason over her situation. She followed the cow-path down to the bed of the stream and then threaded her way along its winding route for a greater distance than she had ever gone before. A broken willow barred her way after a time, and she climbed up on its swaying trunk and let her feet dangle over the frozen streamlet below. The snow made lighter than usual the early evening and extended the time she could safely stay so far from the house.

The colours faded rapidly from the sky and the bewildered girl returned to her own affairs, which were puzzling enough. Of late she had found herself unable to maintain her enthusiasm. She found herself increasingly irritable—from her standpoint the one thing most to be despised in others and which she had supposed most impossible in herself. There were so many unforeseen possibilities within herself that she devoted her entire attention to her own actions and impulses, and was completely drawn away from the consideration of the motives of others by her struggle with the elemental forces in which she found herself engulfed. The temper aroused by John’s objection to her Thanksgiving company had indications in spite of the fact that she had controlled it. Elizabeth knew that she had but barely kept her speech within the limits of kindliness and consideration for Mrs. Hunter, who had not wished to frustrate her plans at all, and she knew that she would be less likely to do so if the offence were repeated. She knew that Mrs. Hunter tried with real honesty of purpose to keep on good terms with her, and yet she also knew that she was increasingly annoyed with whatever she did. There was an element of unfairness in her attitude toward the older woman which alarmed her.

“I’m just like pa, after all,” she thought as she swung her feet and looked in a troubled way down at the frozen stream below.

Elizabeth reflected that when Aunt Susan, or Silas, or Luther Hansen came into the house she became instantly her own buoyant, optimistic self: not that she intentionally feigned such feelings for the benefit of her company, but she felt the presence of trust, of faith in herself and her powers. She did not recognize that such trust was necessary to the unfoldment of character, nor even that it was her birthright.

The girl watched the gathering twilight and deliberately let the time pass without attempting to return to the house until compelled to do so by real darkness, realizing that some beneficial thing was happening in her in this free out-of-doors place, for she was less annoyed and more analytical with each breath she drew in it.

“If only I’d take time to do this sort of thing I’d be more as I ought to be,” she meditated when she had at last risen to go home. “I won’t be like pa! I won’t! I won’t!” she reiterated many times as she walked back, over the frozen cow-path. “I’ll come here every few days. Ma and pa were born to be happy, only they never took time to be.”

And though John was cross because the baby had cried in her absence, Elizabeth felt that she had been helped by getting away from him. She accepted her husband’s reproaches without reply, and was able to forget them even while they were still issuing from his mouth. She kept her temper down all that week, and though the Thanksgiving invitations were not sent, she cooked the dinner and put as many hours into its concoction as if she had had all the people she had hoped to have about her board to eat it, and she was so sunny and natural as she served it that John did not even guess that she was governing herself consciously. She stayed at home the next Sunday and the next, and John Hunter was unaware that she was endeavouring to surrender herself to his will.

“She’ll get over wanting to run somewhere all the time,” he told his mother, and Mrs. Hunter, to whom these people were not pleasing, agreed with him, and thought that it was just as well if it were so, not realizing that the girl lived alone in their house and that she might have an attitude toward these people distinctly different from theirs.

This winter, like the preceding one, passed with Elizabeth at home. There was no peace to be had if she thought of going anywhere for any purpose whatever. Elizabeth went nowhere and required few clothes. The cold the child had caught on that first trip to Luther's was sufficient excuse to prevent any further foolishness on the part of its mother. However, a trip to town was in waiting for Elizabeth Hunter and was proposed by John Hunter himself.

There had been a "warm spell" in the month of February and John had asked Elizabeth to help him with the pump in the barnyard, which had been working badly for days. It was Saturday evening, and Jake and the other hired man had been granted time off that day; the pump had refused to work at all after they were gone, and with a hundred cattle waiting for water it was necessary to impress any one available with the duty of helping. Elizabeth was more than willing to help: it meant a couple of hours out of doors. They had worked industriously and their efforts were about crowned with success when Mrs. Hunter came out to them with the baby wrapped in a warm shawl. John tossed aside the extra piece of leather he had cut from the top of an old boot and fitted the round piece in his hand about the sucker.

"Now, mother, you shouldn't bring that child out here; You'll have him sick on our hands again," he said.

"Oh, lots of children go out of doors in winter. I took you out whenever I wanted to, and you've 312
lived to tell the tale," his mother said easily, seating herself on the end of the trough.

"Well, I don't want anything to happen to him for a few days, I can tell you. I want you to keep him and let Elizabeth go in to town with me and sign the mortgage on this eighty, Monday," John replied, examining the valve with great attention.

"Why, I thought this eighty was already mortgaged!" Mrs. Hunter exclaimed.

"Well, it is," John replied uneasily, "but I've got to raise the interest before I can get that bunch of shoats ready to sell, and I've got to do it that way."

He did not look at either of the two women, but kept himself very busy about the rod and sucker he was manipulating.

Mrs. Hunter seldom remarked upon anything that was done about the farm, but this was surprising news. *A second mortgage* on part of the land! She had just opened her mouth to speak, when she happened to glance across at her daughter-in-law. Elizabeth's face was white. Something in it implored Mrs. Hunter to go away, to leave them to have the matter out together, and the older woman took her cue from it and went with a haste which caused her son to look up from the piston with which he fumbled.

"She's gone to the house; I motioned to her to go," Elizabeth announced. "She don't know much about mortgages, but she knows this won't do. You told me last week that the hogs would be 313
ready in time. My soul alive, John! do you realize what you are doing? This is the home-eighty! What's happened to the hogs?"

"Say, look here! If I want to mortgage this eighty, I'm going to do it. Those hogs are just where it pays to feed them. If I sell now, I'll lose half the profits."

John got up and faced her ready to fight, if fight he must on this question. He had chosen an opportune time to tell it, but he meant to do as he wished about those hogs and the land and whatever else they possessed. He hated to open a discussion, but he did not hate to continue one after he had made the plunge. He had feasible reasons for all that he did.

Elizabeth saw that he meant to insist and she resented the deception he had practised in securing this loan without telling her, but the danger was so great that she could not afford to let her feelings blind her, nor to put the thing in a bad light by seeming to wrangle about it. She looked at him steadily, so steadily, in fact, that John was disconcerted. The work in hand gave excuse for withdrawing his eyes and Elizabeth watched him arrange the knot of the rope so that they could lower the pipe back into the well. The girl did not begin to speak at once: she marshalled her forces and considered what manner of argument she would put forth. She knew that every piece of land they possessed except the Mitchell County pastures was covered with one third of its value in incumbrances. If the interest was hard to meet now, what would it be three years hence? She had come to understand that the man she had married was not a 314
farmer. She helped him lower the long pipe into the well, and watched him try the pump handle to see if the sucker would work. It was slow in drawing, and she filled a small pail from the trough and poured it into the pump head. After a few sputtering strokes the water began to come freely, and then she had to wait for the pumping to stop before she could make herself heard above its rumblings.

John Hunter knew perfectly well that Elizabeth was waiting and prolonged the work till the great trough was full. When it began to overflow and there was no further need for drawing water, he turned abruptly toward the gate where the cattle were. Elizabeth had waited in the frosty air till she was chilled from standing and could not remain for the stock to drink before she had a chance to go to the house.

"I want to talk to you before those cattle come out here," she said, more hurt by his avoidance of her now than she had been by the original deception; he was really ignoring her as a factor in their mutual affairs. "I have to protest against this mortgage, John. We ought to keep a small home free at least, and instead of putting more on this eighty we ought to sell enough of the stuff to pay off on this part. Every farmer in this country has his nose on the interest grindstone, and my life has been spoiled with it ever since I can remember. Please, dear, let's not put a second mortgage on this eighty."

In her anxiety to get John's attention Elizabeth went forward and put her hand on his arm, forgetting in her earnestness the slight he had just shown toward her in ignoring her claims to a voice in the matter.

John Hunter shook off the detaining hand impatiently.

"If you're going to run this business you may as well do it without my help and I'll quit," he said, his body braced away from her with the plain intimation that he preferred that she should not touch him.

Elizabeth hesitated. Her impulse was to turn and leave him without further words, but the farm, their future comfort, the whole scheme of family peace and harmony depended upon obtaining a hearing.

"I don't want to run things—really, I do not. I've never tried to, but I've lived on a farm, and I know how impossible it is ever to raise a mortgage if you get it on a place. I—let's sell enough to raise the one we have on this eighty while we can, instead. I'm willing to live on a little; but, oh, John, I do so want to have one place that is our own."

"There's money in those cattle," John answered sullenly. "A woman don't know anything about such things. You'll go and get mother started on it too, I suppose. I'm going to do as I see fit about it, anyhow. I know there's money to be made there."

With a great sob in her throat, Elizabeth turned to the house.

"Look here, Elizabeth," John called after her peremptorily.

Elizabeth stopped respectfully to listen, but she did not return to his side. John waited, thinking she would come to him.

"Cattle ain't like ordinary farming," he argued with a flush of anger. "A man simply has to take time to let steers grow into money. We haven't been at it a long enough time. Those big steers will be ready to feed this fall, and corn's going to be cheap. We'd be cutting off our noses to spite our own faces to sell now."

"Perhaps," the girl replied bitterly, and went on to the house.

She knew that John had argued with the hope of getting her to admit herself in the wrong, not to hear her side of the case.

John Hunter gazed after his retreating wife in vexed petulance for a moment and then, with a sigh of relief, turned toward the waiting cattle.

"She'll be ready when I want to go to town all the same," he reflected.

CHAPTER XIV

MORTGAGES OF SOUL

The mortgage was signed. The fine weather had brought many people to Colebyville. Elizabeth had not been in town for a year, and the sight of pleasant, happy folk greeting each other cordially and wandering from store to store bartering eggs and butter for groceries and family necessities, and exchanging ideas and small talk about their purchases, had accentuated her isolation. Those people who knew her spoke to her also, but with an air of suspicion and reserve. A puzzling feature of the day had been that John had received a more cordial reception than she had. The main suspicion had been directed against her. There seemed to be a certain acceptance of John's "stuck-upness." He had some reason for his attitude toward them which they were inclined to accept, but Elizabeth saw that to this community she was a "beggar on horseback." Instead of seeing that the man who had thrust her into this false relation was utterly inadequate to realize it, or that if he realized it he was utterly indifferent to her sufferings in it, she inquired into her own failure to get his attention, and felt that he was after all a better husband than any she had ever known, with few exceptions. John had managed to add to her confusion where he was concerned that day by being floridly insistent upon her spending a generous sum upon her purchases and taking as much interest in what she bought as a woman. There had been so much to buy that Elizabeth's economical soul had been torn by the desire to cut down the expense. The baby was ready for short clothes and there had been materials for little dresses, stockings, little shoes, a hood and cloak, to get for him alone, and Elizabeth saw in every dollar spent a dollar lost at interest-paying time. John had been happy and genial on the way home and had altogether treated her so much better than her mood had permitted her to treat him that there was a bit of self-accusation in her meditations. Everything had gone wrong. The waters of human affection ran everywhere in the wrong direction. She desired understanding between herself and her husband; her attitude toward the community in which they lived had been one of friendliness, her attitude toward Aunt Susan and Luther one of whole-hearted love, her attitude toward this family of which she found herself a part that of a devoted slave, yet nowhere had she been able to make proper alliances. Some curious defeating

element had crept into every relation life offered her. While the rest ate supper that night, Elizabeth, who had no appetite and was too sick with a sense of failure to eat, nursed her baby and meditated upon the indications of the day's occurrences. Forgetting her surroundings, she drew in a fluttering, sobbing breath. Jake Ransom, across the corner of the table, caught the sound of that sob and flashed a quick glance in her direction. His eyes were as quickly withdrawn, but Elizabeth knew without looking up that he had heard. With a desire to escape observation, she made an excuse of putting the baby away and went to the bedroom with the child. Slipping him into his little nightdress she made him comfortable for the night, after which she went back to the dining room to keep Jake from thinking she had anything to cry about. There was an added hum of voices, and she went in with some curiosity.

Silas Chamberlain stood beside the stove with his old cap and his home-knit mittens under his arm, while he leaned over the welcome fire. The blues were gone instantly. There was such a glad light in her eyes as she advanced to meet him that Jake Ransom wondered if he had been mistaken in the quivering breath, and there was such genuine pleasure in her surprised greeting that Silas Chamberlain was warmed and fed by it.

"Where's that baby?" he demanded. "You ain't gone an' tucked him into bed this time o' night, have you? I come special t' see 'im."

For months Elizabeth had wanted to see Silas and the baby in a "free for all tumble" and her eyes danced with delight at the idea. She had not had such a thrill in many weeks; the young mother spoke in every line of her young face. As if by magic her troubles fell away from her. Crooking her finger beckoningly at the old man, she crept on tiptoe to the bedroom door. She had left a lamp lighted in the room and it was possible to observe the baby without him being aware of their presence. Silas had crept behind her like an Indian stalking a deer, and she caught his suppressed breath as she turned with her finger on her lips at the door. The rest of the group trailed behind with anticipatory grins.

Master John Hunter lay on the bed, very wide awake, making sputtering efforts to devour his thumb, while he kicked his little feet as vigorously as the confines of the pinning-blanket would allow.

Silas chuckled. Hearing a noise at the door, the heir of the house rolled his head on his pillow till his mother's face came within the range of his vision. Her absence that day had made the child more than usually eager for her presence. The little feet kicked more wildly than ever, and forgetting the generous slice of thumb still to be devoured, he grinned such a vast and expansive grin that the hand to which the thumb was attached, being free, joined the other in waving salutations of such joyful pantomime that the object of his industrious beckonings, completely carried into the current, rushed at him and, sweeping him up in her arms, tossed him on high as gleefully as if she had not been weighed down by care but a moment before the old man's advent into the room.

"There, Mr. Chamberlain, was there ever another like him?" she cried.

Baby, who had come down from a point as high as his mother's arms could reach, doubled his fat little body together with a smothered, squeezed off little gurgle of delight. Silas was aquiver with sympathetic glee. Those were not the days when babies were raised by scientific rules, and Silas caught the child from its mother's arms and repeated the tossing process, while the baby shouted and struggled. At last the three, followed by the family, retired to convenient chairs about the sitting-room fire.

"Now, Jack Horner, you can pare that thumb down a leetle more if you want t'. You've swallowed enough wind to give you the colic for a day or two," Silas said when the child began to hiccough.

Elizabeth clapped her hands delightedly.

"You have named the baby!" she exclaimed.

"How's that?" Silas asked.

"Oh, John can't bear to have him called Johnnie, and John is too awfully old for him now. Little Jack Horner—no, Little Jack Hunter. I'm so glad! I just do love it; and we had called him Baby till I was afraid we'd never quit it," Elizabeth said.

They kept the old man as long as they could induce him to stay, and when he did go home it was with the settled conviction that he had been wanted. He described the visit enthusiastically to Liza Ann and tried to induce her to go over to see Elizabeth the next Sunday. Silas craved the privilege of that baby's presence.

"I know, Si," his wife replied, "but she could come here if she wanted to. It's her fool notions. John was th' greatest hand t' go you ever saw till he married her, an' now he don't go nowhere, an' when I asked him about it, he said she wasn't well! She's as well as any woman that's nursin', an' she's got his mother t' help 'er too."

"Well, I don't pretend t' know th' why's an' th' wherefores of it, but I do know there ain't a stuck-up bone in 'er body—I don't care what nobody says," loyal Silas Chamberlain replied.

The new mood stayed with Elizabeth Hunter and called for much perplexed introspection. It had been a perplexing day. There was no reason that she could assign for her contradictory actions. She found herself even softened toward John and able to enter into his attempt to be sociable after Silas's departure. He seemed to be anxious to set himself before her in a kindlier light and she was able to meet the attempt as he wished. Elizabeth lost faith in herself as she saw her

apparent whimsicalness and began to lash herself into line as John and his mother wished. She asked no more to be taken places.

In May, Luther came to help John with his team, and for the first time in months Elizabeth saw a neighbour woman. Luther lifted Sadie down from the high seat with as much care as if she had been a child.

“Sadie’s lonesome at the house alone all day, an’ it was good of you, Lizzie, t’ ask ’er,” he said as he climbed back into the wagon.

Elizabeth wanted a visit with Luther, himself, but was less fearful of a day with Sadie than she had been. She took her guest into the house and at the sitting-room door paused to point to Master Jack, who sat on an old quilt with a pillow at his back, digging his little heels into the floor and holding out dimpled hands imploringly.

“You darling child!” Sadie cried, going down on her knees at his side and hugging him till he sent up an indignant howl. “Isn’t he cunnin’? Isn’t he?” she cried, releasing him and subsiding into a doubled figure by his side. “Honestly, Lizzie, why don’t you bring him over?” 323

She looked so insistent, that she had to be answered.

“I don’t go any place, Sadie,” Elizabeth answered truthfully.

“Is it so, that Mr. Hunter won’t take you?” Sadie asked, and then at sight of the anger in Elizabeth’s face rose to her knees and laid her hand on her arm hastily. “I didn’t say that to hurt; honestly, Lizzie, I didn’t. I’m trying not to do that this time.”

Elizabeth’s indignation was cooled slightly by the genuineness of the speech, but she did not understand the last sentence till her eye happened to fall on Sadie’s form. In a flash she saw what was meant. Forgetting her hurt, she was silent from pure delight. She knew what a child would mean in that home. The other misunderstood her silence and hastened on with her apologies:

“Honest, Lizzie, I didn’t want to hurt, but they do say such mean things about it that I want you t’ know. Why don’t you ever take Mrs. Hunter and th’ baby and go t’ meetin’?”

Elizabeth’s face went white as she realized that she must continue to answer since she had begun.

“I don’t care in the least what they say, Sadie, and I don’t want you ever to mention this to me again,” she said sternly.

Sadie’s face worked in silent misery till she could control her voice. 324

“You won’t be mad at me, Lizzie? I told Luther I wouldn’t be mean t’ nobody till *it* was born,” she said with quivering lip.

Elizabeth took some seconds to consider the thing that had been told to her. It was of far more importance than the gossip Sadie had just hinted at, but the gossip must be answered first.

“I won’t be mad at you at all,” she said after a moment. “That is, I won’t if I never have to listen to such things again. I don’t care in the least, if I don’t have to hear it. Don’t ever come to me again with anything that anybody says. Now, then, tell me about yourself. I half believe you’re glad of it.”

“Glad?” Sadie told her secret, which could be a secret no more. Luther had wanted the child, and she had come to the point of wanting it for his sake, and the sight of chubby Jack Hunter had aroused the latent mother love in her till, as she talked, her eyes shone with the brightness of imaginative maternity. She implored Elizabeth to come to her aid when the day of her labour arrived in September, and rambled along telling of their preparations for its coming, and little home incidents, disclosing a home life of so sweet a character that if Elizabeth Hunter had not been sincere and utterly without jealousy she would have drawn the discussion to a close.

The incident had a peculiar effect upon Elizabeth. She began really to like Sadie, and all her old desire for harmony in the home welled up in her anew. The old attitude of self-blame was assumed also. Here was Sadie Crane, the most spiteful girl that had ever been raised on these prairies, able to command the love and respect of the man she had married, to do things because her husband desired them, even so difficult a thing as the bearing of children, and she, Elizabeth, had failed to accomplish any of these things. There was a renewed resolve to be more patient. Elizabeth hated sulking, and the remembrance of the day when she had gone to sign the mortgage and had been unable to respond to John’s good-humoured willingness to get abundant supplies because she saw the money going out so fast was fixed in her mind with new significance. Here was Sadie doing the things that her husband wished of her and obtaining not only his love but her own self-respect, while she, Elizabeth, was able to command neither. Instead of reasoning upon the differences between the two husbands, Elizabeth reasoned on the differences between her own actions and those of Sadie, and from the results of that reasoning entered upon a period of self-denial and abject devotion to the man of her choice. John Hunter accepted this new devotion with satisfied serenity, and, not being obstructed in any of his little exactions, became more cheerful and agreeable to live with. This added to Elizabeth’s conviction that the difficulty had been somewhat within herself. She ceased to ask for the things which caused friction, and there was a season of comparative peace. 325

In July, however, a new phase of the old difficulty arose. Nathan and Susan Hornby were driving past the Hunter house one Sunday afternoon. Elizabeth saw them and with a glad little shout ran to the road to greet them. 326

Susan Hornby's delight was fully equal to her own. The two persuaded Nathan to wait till Aunt Susan should have time to go into the house and see the baby. Nathan would not go in, but sat waiting in offended aloofness in the wagon.

"Why don't you come to see me, Elizabeth?" Aunt Susan whispered as they went back to the wagon. "He's always loved you so, but he thinks—well, he's always been so good to me about everything else, but his feelings are awfully hurt about you. Can't you come soon?" She looked into the girl's face with such a wealth of pent-up love that Elizabeth answered positively:

"I will come next Sunday, Aunt Susan. You may look for us, for we'll be there."

The glad look in Susan Hornby's eyes was a sad reproach to the younger woman, and though Elizabeth wondered how she would get her husband's consent, she made up her mind to force him by every means in her power to comply. All through the week she had it upon her mind, but Elizabeth had learned not to open a discussion till the necessity of action was upon her, and it was not till Sunday morning that she mentioned the visit to John.

Nothing but the pleading in Susan Hornby's face could have induced Elizabeth to ask to be taken to see her at this time, but the troubled whispering of Aunt Susan about this visit had awakened Elizabeth to the tragedy of her neglect. Susan Hornby had never before whispered 327
where Nathan was concerned before. Elizabeth at last saw the loneliness of the old couple. It would never do to continue such treatment of those who had befriended her when she was in need.

Jack was fretful that Sunday morning and John walked the floor with him while Elizabeth finished her breakfast dishes. The breakfast had been late and it was time to get ready if they were to go. Her heart sank as she approached the subject. Jack had not slept well of late. He was not ill, but teething. Always a light sleeper, Elizabeth had kept the fact of his indisposition to herself, hoping that John, who slept soundly, might not be aware of it, but the baby had fretted in the daytime and was now tossing restlessly in his father's arms. Elizabeth was worn out from the loss of sleep and was half afraid to trust herself to make the request, because it would require politic treatment to get John in the mood. If she became vexed or upset by his opposition she would lose her opportunity. Elizabeth was weaker than John when her feelings were ruffled. She had planned and waited till the last moment, afraid of herself and afraid of her husband. She looked at him as he paced back and forth, back and forth, with a torrent of longing swelling up in her and threatening to bring her tears. She must find a way to get his ear.

"Let me take Jack," she said, hoping that something in the conversation would give her a natural opening for what must come. 328

"Poor little chap," John replied, releasing the child.

Elizabeth was bathed in perspiration from the hurry of having late breakfast and the fact that she would never dare to ask to be taken before all the work was done and the kitchen ready for close inspection, and she thought indignantly of the scrubbed floors of yesterday and wondered how the child could be expected to be well when he was fed on overheated milk day after day. Instantly she put the thought away from her. She must be cool and careful if she were to get to Aunt Susan's to-day.

"I'll sponge him off with soda in his bath and he'll be all right. I told Aunt Susan we'd take dinner with them to-day, and it's nearly half-past ten now. They have dinner at noon on Sunday as well as other days; so run and hitch up, and I'll be ready with baby. I'll have your things laid out so you can jump right into them when you come in."

She looked down at the baby so as not to meet his eye, but the offhand assumption of his readiness to go seemed to her to be encouraging.

"With that child?" was the astonished exclamation.

"It won't hurt him as much as for me to stand over the stove and cook a dinner at home," Elizabeth answered firmly, "and, besides, John, I promised Aunt Susan we'd come. Now don't be cross. I've got to go, and that's all there is about it."

John Hunter was actually astonished now. He had started out with his usual pretenses, but this was something new. Elizabeth had promised without consulting him! What was happening? 329

"You may be willing to take that child out in his condition—I'm not," he said severely. "I don't understand what you're thinking about."

"*I'm* thinking there'd be less harm to him in a day of rest for his mother than anything else," she said bitterly, "and I am not allowed to get a minute of it in this house. *You'd* let me heat his milk to the boiling point to get dinner and think it was what we both deserved!"

She was instantly dismayed at what she had done. She had spit out all the actuality of her convictions in spite of every effort not to reply unkindly when he was unfair to her. She could not afford to retort sharply to-day. She must resort to other tactics if she were to win to-day. Besides, the truth was only a half-truth. John did not in his heart wish either of them harm; he was just a blind sort of bossing creature who had somehow got into command of her and enjoyed bullying her and setting tasks to keep her occupied. He owned her, however, and she must court his consent to this visit.

"Please, dear. I told Aunt Susan we'd come. I'd—I'd have told you before—only—only I was afraid you'd not be willing—and then I'd get to crying and give up—and I've got to go. Now

don't be cross. Go this once good-naturedly."

To get close to him she put her hand on his arm and put up her face coaxingly for a kiss.

John Hunter ignored his wife's signal for tender relations and shook off her hand impatiently without looking at her. 330

"Even if Jack were well I wouldn't go away and leave mother alone all day." John moved restlessly away from her.

Elizabeth would not give up.

"I'll manage mother. She'll go if I insist." John was edging toward the door. "Anyhow I told Aunt Susan I'd come." John was going through the door. "Please hurry. We must be on our way pretty soon," she called after his receding back.

Elizabeth's lips tightened with vexation at the contempt shown by his refusal to answer, and then loosened and spread into an amused smile.

"He can be just as mad as he wants to. I stuck to it and am going to get to go. It's better than to give up to him all the time."

She turned into the sitting room and putting the baby on the floor emptied the clothespin bag in his lap to keep him occupied, and flew up the stairs to Mrs. Hunter's room.

"Mother, we're going to Aunt Susan's to-day and you are to go with us. Now don't say you aren't, for it is settled," she said, slipping her hand over the older woman's mouth to prevent the objection she saw coming, but nothing she would do or say would persuade the older woman to go.

"I'll settle that with John when he comes in," Mrs. Hunter said, slipping away from the restraining hand. "There's no reason why you should stay at home on my account and I will not have it done," was all that she could get out of her. 331

"But John will not go without you!" Elizabeth cried in dismay.

The girl was tempted to tell her of the gossip she had heard, but it suddenly seemed small and not worth while. She had already told her that Aunt Susan had her promise to come in time for dinner; it occurred to her to tell her of Nathan's attitude toward them for their unfriendly neglect, but that too seemed unnecessary and trivial since they were going. On that point Elizabeth did not intend to give in an inch: she was going, even if John *was* cross about it.

"Yes, he will go without me, for I'll see that he does," Mrs. Hunter assured her, and with that Elizabeth was content.

Taking the baby to her own room, she undressed and bathed him and then arrayed him in the daintiest white dress she had for him, determined that Aunt Susan should see him at his best. As she nursed him so that he would drop off to sleep till they were ready to go, she looked long and earnestly at the soft skin and dark lashes of his baby face and realized as she had never done before the loneliness of the old couple whom they were going to visit. The little Katie of that house had been taken from them at about this age. A sob arose in Elizabeth's throat when she considered how they had besought her for an opportunity to pour the dammed-up stream of their love at the feet of this child, and how slighted their efforts had been. 332

Jack was wide-eyed and would not sleep, and after losing much valuable time his mother set him in the middle of the bed and began her own preparations. As she looked about for something suitable to wear, she saw a simple white percale with red dots scattered over it, which she had worn the summer she had lived in Aunt Susan's house. So little had she gone out and so free from personal vanity was she that it was still eligible to best wear. Besides, it had associations that were pleasant.

"Why, I made it in Aunt Susan's own house," she said aloud.

She looked down at it wistfully; those had been happy days.

A sudden impulse made her drop her heavy hair from its coil high on her head and, picking up her comb, divide it with deft movement. Brushing it into shape, she braided it as of old, in two braids, and then fished with rapturous fingers in her ribbon box for the bows she had always worn with that dress. When the bows were tied she put the braids back with a characteristic toss of the head and stood looking at herself in the glass.

"There now, he can't be cross after that," she said, feeling more as if she were her real self than she had done for many months.

Jack was restless and cried. Elizabeth turned to him with a start.

"You blessed baby! Your mother was way off and had forgotten that there was such a small person as you."

She sat down and nursed him again to fill in the time till his father should come and dress. This time he seemed sleepy, and Elizabeth sang happily to him, kissing his pink palm and satisfying the maternal instinct in her by softly stroking his plump body. He had never looked so fair to her in all the months that she had had him. John was long in coming and she fell into a dreamy state of maternal comfort as she rocked, and forgot the hour and the place and the dinner that would soon be waiting at Aunt Susan's, till the baby went to sleep in her arms. 333

When Jack was at last soundly asleep she placed him on the bed, covering him with a piece of white mosquito netting to keep the flies from disturbing him, and, rearranging dress and

ribbons, went into the sitting room to see what time it was. An exclamation of dismay escaped her. It was but ten minutes to twelve o'clock! She had dreamed much longer than she had been aware. In a fever of hurry she ran back to the bedroom and laid out John's best suit. That had pleasant associations also. But what could be keeping him so long when it was time to go? As soon as everything was in order she ran to the barn to see what the trouble was. John came out as she neared the barn door, talking to Jake, who followed leisurely.

"Are you ready to dress?" she asked hastily, vexed at the signs of loitering.

"Dress? Why—what? Oh, I forgot. I told you I didn't want to go," he said impatiently.

"Well, you're going to take me if it is late," she said firmly. "Aunt Susan was told that we'd come, and she has dinner waiting this minute. Jake, put the horses in the wagon while Mr. Hunter dresses, and be as quick about it as you can." 334

"The horses—th' horses are in th' pasture, Lizzie," Jake said hesitantly. "I didn't know an'—an'—I—an' we turned 'em out an hour ago."

Jake Ransom saw the colour die out of the young face and understood exactly what had happened. He saw her turn without a look at her husband and start to the house, bowed and broken and without hope. Jake understood that a trick had been played on her, for he had been slow about turning the horses out and John had untied and led the team used for driving to the pasture gate himself.

"I don't know whether I kin ketch 'em 'r not, but I'll try," he called after her.

Elizabeth turned back hopefully, but John said

"Now look here, Elizabeth, those horses have been playing like mad for half an hour, and you could no more catch them than you could fly." Turning to Jake, "I'll take Mrs. Hunter next Sunday if she's just got to go. A man wants to rest when Sunday comes," he added under his breath.

Jake Ransom watched Elizabeth drag her listless feet up the steps and shot a look of disdain at the back of John Hunter as he followed her.

"You dirty cuss!" he exclaimed under his breath. "Lizzie's as good a woman as th' is in this country, an' she don't git nothin' she wants. I bet I see t' gittin' them horses ready next Sunday myself." 335

Going into her bedroom, Elizabeth Hunter laid off the finery of girlhood, and with it her girlhood also.

"I'll never ask him again," she told herself, and put her hair back into its woman's knot and went to the kitchen and began dinner.

Susan Hornby shaded her eyes with her hand, and looked up the road for the fortieth time.

"The baby must be worse, Nate," she said to her husband when at last there had to be a discussion of the matter.

Nathan Hornby followed her into the kitchen and helped to take up the dinner which had been waiting over an hour. His head burned with indignation, but there was something in Susan's defeat which brooked no discussion on his side. They had come as near quarrelling over this invitation as they had ever done about anything in their married life.

As they sat at the table eating their belated dinner, a lonely horseman appeared coming down the road from the west.

"It's Jake! I wonder if he's going for the doctor?" Susan exclaimed. "You never can tell what anybody has to contend with." And the meal was left to cool unfinished as the old couple left the house and hailed the rider.

"I didn't hear nothin' about th' baby bein' worse," Jake was obliged to answer when put under question.

He was so conscious that Elizabeth would not approve of the truth being told that he stammered and made his listeners feel that something was left untold. In fact, Jake's reticence was of the exact quality to add to the distrust already aroused. He edged away at last and left Susan Hornby looking at her husband in such a state that Nathan was moved to say: 336

"Never mind, Sue, I'll take you over after dinner and you can see for yourself."

Susan Hornby turned and started to the house. Nathan followed her aquiver with the slight that his common sense told him had been put upon her by those whom she had so faithfully and fully served.

Susan stumbled and put her hands to her head with a harsh laugh. Nathan hurried forward a step and looked searchingly into her face. With a great sob, he put his arms about her. Susan paid not the slightest attention to him, but let herself be guided along the path without actual resistance. Her face was flushed and her eyes did not see. She went docilely to her room and permitted the stricken husband to place her on the bed, where he loosened her collar and, removing her clothing, dressed her for bed as if she had been a little child. When nothing more could be done, he knelt by her and fondling her unresponsive hand let the tears he could no longer control pour over his ashen cheeks.

"Don't you know me, Sue? Don't you know your old Nate at all?" he quavered, but there was no

reply except the puffing breath which was every moment growing more and more laboured. Nathan knew what it meant—she had been so once before.

As the Hunter family sat about the dinner table on Tuesday, Silas Chamberlain drove up to the side gate, and after tying his team came to the door. He entered when bidden, but would not sit down, and looked about him with an effort to adjust his impressions with what he saw before him.

“Ain’t you goin’ t’ th’ funeral?” he asked when he saw that there seemed to be no air of mourning in the house.

“Funeral?” John Hunter exclaimed. “Who’s dead?”

“I told Nate Hornby you didn’t know nothin’ about it.”

“Hornby? We haven’t heard of any one being dead. Who is it?” John Hunter asked, puzzled at the reticence of the old man, who stood with his straw hat in his hand and slid his fingers about its greasy brim uneasily.

“Is—is it possible you all didn’t know Mrs. Hornby was sick?” he asked, unable to lift his eyes.

There was a low cry from Elizabeth Hunter, the noise of her escape to the privacy of her own room, the sound of moans and cries after the door was shut, and Silas Chamberlain paid bitter toll for delivering his message. The family sat stunned and silent in the presence of those sounds of grief. The bowed head of the old man told his comprehension of the news and left Jake Ransom with an understanding of him which words could never have given.

As soon as Elizabeth could get control of her feelings and command her scattered senses, she snatched her bonnet from the chair beside the bed where she had dropped it before dinner and flew to the dining room again, her one impulse to get to the side of the friend whose spirit had gone from her. Going to Silas, she clutched him by the arm with fingers that sank into the flesh like a vise.

“Take me to her!—take me now!” she cried, pushing him toward the door.

“I’ll take you, Elizabeth,” John Hunter said, rising, and Jake Ransom saw the look of nameless horror she took on at thought of her husband’s presence.

“Take me to her at once, Mr. Chamberlain. Do, for God’s sake, take me to her!” she cried, and pulled the old man through the door with nervous hands, and then ran down the path before him and began to pull at the straps with which the horses were tied.

John followed them out, still protesting that he would take her himself if she would wait, but without a look in his direction she urged Silas on.

“Hurry! Hurry! Do!” she implored, and Silas gave the horses such a sharp slap with the lines that they started on a swift trot almost before they were seated, leaving John Hunter in the midst of his expostulations.

“I’ll bring her back safe,” Silas called over his shoulder.

Now that no further action was possible, Elizabeth sat with her hands clasped, her teeth set, and her eyes looking into vacancy, numbed beyond words, asking no questions and making no complaints. Silas’s heart beat with an anguish of sympathy. He stopped at his own house a moment to tell Liza Ann that he would come back for her within the hour, and still Elizabeth gave no sign of realizing what was going on about her.

At last a terrible thought took hold of Silas, and he pulled up his team, which was sweating heavily.

“You ain’t fit t’ go, Lizzie. You ain’t fit t’ go, child. I’m goin’ t’ take you back home.” He began to turn the horses’ heads toward home, and then stopped for her wandering wits to gather.

“Why, oh, why don’t you hurry?” Elizabeth exclaimed when she realized that they were standing still.

The old man’s heart was torn with pity, and it was in the voice of a mother that he addressed her.

“You ain’t fit t’ go,” he repeated. “I’m going t’ take you back home.” There was a white look about her mouth that frightened him.

The girl grasped his arm with fingers that closed with a grip like a drowning person.

“I couldn’t see her when she was living—surely I can see her dead.” Then with a wail, “Oh, no—no, not dead! Oh, my God!”

She sobbed in a dry sort of way that contracted Silas’s throat to witness, and left the old man almost as undone as herself, and without further argument he drove on to Nathan Hornby’s desolated home, where he lifted her tenderly down from the high seat, with a mist before his eyes that blurred her image till it was unrecognizable, and stood watching her go up the path.

A woman met her at the door, but she did not know who, and brushed past her hurriedly and ran into the kitchen, where she could see Nathan Hornby sitting with his head on his arms beside the kitchen table.

Going down on her knees with a swift movement, Elizabeth threw her arm across his shoulder, and laid her head beside his, sobbing convulsively. Nathan raised his head in dull surprise, and seeing who it was, shook her arm off resentfully and rose to his feet. Elizabeth crawled after

him on her knees and clasped his own with both arms, turning her stricken face up to his and crying:

“Oh, I know! I know how you feel, but truly, truly, Uncle Nate, I am not to blame. For God’s sake —for God’s sake, forgive!”

He looked down on her coldly and was tempted to spurn her from him with his foot, but there was such anguish in voice and eye as he himself had hardly felt, and his wife’s words, her last words, flashed through his bewildered brain: “We can’t tell what anybody has to contend with.” He stood irresolute while she rose to her feet. When he did not answer her, Elizabeth threw herself down in the chair from which he had just risen and bowing her head on the table moaned in such bitterness of spirit that Nathan was moved to pity, and would have comforted her if he could.

Silas, having tied his team, came to the kitchen door, but on seeing its occupants turned hastily and went out to his wagon again, where he stood choking and swallowing in helpless misery.

Presently, Nathan Hornby, at a loss to check her grief, laid a hand on her shoulder and said:

“Come and see her, Elizabeth.”

Elizabeth Hunter arose like one walking in her sleep and followed Nathan to the sitting room. 341
The black casket resting on two chairs in the middle of the room was a worse shock than any she had yet had, and with a horror-stricken cry of fright she fled to the kitchen again, and when Nathan reached her side, her teeth were chattering and great beads of sweat covered her quivering face; she sank into Nathan’s chair unable to support herself.

When at last she was assisted tenderly to her feet, she begged feebly to be taken home.

“But you can’t ride that far,” Silas protested, pityingly. “You just naturally can’t ride that far in th’ big wagon, child.”

For answer she dragged herself forward and staggered to the chair where they had put her bonnet. Nathan saw that her strength was returning and gave Silas a little nod. They each took an arm to steady her, and so Elizabeth passed from the presence of her one dear friend into a life as colourless as the form she left behind.

“He’s an awful sick child, Mrs. Hunter, but we may—I believe we will pull him through.”

It was Thursday, and Doctor Morgan sat opposite Elizabeth, holding the hand of the shadow of the baby of three days ago.

“You see that milk has not agreed with him. Mr. Hunter says you took a drive over to Hornby’s the day of the funeral. The heat and excitement has been too much for you. You nursed him immediately on getting home?”

“Yes,” she replied lifelessly. 342

“Well, we’ll have to wean him now,” the old doctor said, looking the unresponsive mother over sharply. “It won’t do to try any experiments with him. Your milk may be all right now, but he wouldn’t stand a relapse.”

Elizabeth made no reply and listened patiently to his directions for preparing the new food. After he was gone, she laid the shrunken little body on the bed and went to the kitchen to prepare the milk. She took up the new bottle with the rubber on the end and looked at it in stupefied, aimless disgust. Her impulse was to fling it out of the open door, but remembering that she would but poison him by putting his lips to her own breast, she turned to the table and placing the bottle in a pan covered it with cold water and set it on the stove to come to a slow boil.

Going back to the bedroom she picked up the pillow—the child was so limp that they had to handle him on a pillow—and sat down, holding it close to her heart.

John came in. She did not look up. He came over to her and stooped to look at the half-conscious child, who lay with half-open eyes and under jaw dropped down. There were deep greenish rings under those eyes, and a great sob broke from John Hunter’s throat.

Elizabeth stirred dully and looked up, but did not speak. There was that about her which made her unapproachable. She showed no resentment, no anger, no emotion of any sort. She had come home from Nathan’s house as she was now. She had refused to go to the funeral, but she had had supper ready when John and his mother had returned from the graveyard, and it had 343
been as orderly and as well cooked as usual, but she had not talked at the meal, nor seemed to hear when she was spoken to, but there was evidently no pouting. John had tried to explain, and she had given silent opportunity, and when it had been finished had said, “Yes,” in a hollow voice, and had moved on about her work without looking up, but there had been no apparent resentment.

Before bedtime that night the baby (who had gone to sleep while she had nursed him when she had come home), awoke crying. She had taken him up and had offered her breast, but it had turned away as if sickened, and had continued to cry till, presently, it had doubled its little body together with a sharp scream and vomited till its breath was nearly gone. There had been a sour odour to the contents of its stomach that had struck terror to their hearts, and before morning Doctor Morgan was at its side. He had noted the leaden movements of the mother and calling John outside had questioned him regarding her. John, troubled at her indifference to him and the lifelessness of her attitude even toward the babe, had told him all he knew—as he

understood it.

“Of course she boarded with them two years ago,” he had said in concluding, “but I don’t see that that needs to cut such a figure.”

“Were your wife and Mrs. Hornby great friends?” Doctor Morgan asked, studying John Hunter and puzzling over the evident mystery of the situation.

“Ye-e-s-s!” with perplexed deliberation; “that is, she liked her better than any of the rest of the neighbours around here. She wanted to go there last Sunday and I thought the baby wasn’t fit to take out. It looks now as if I was right.” 344

“Well, she’s had a shock of some kind, and if you don’t look out She’ll be down on our hands too. You’d better get a girl or let your mother do the work for a couple of weeks,” Doctor Morgan advised.

And John Hunter had looked faithfully for some one to take his wife’s place in the kitchen and had found what she had told him when Hepsie left to be true. In many places where there was no excuse given and girls were at home he had met with a sort of refusal which stung him to the quick.

Elizabeth rocked the baby with a mechanical dead sort of care. John was emotional enough to be badly broken up by the child’s looks, but Elizabeth’s unresponsiveness at such a time made of it a tragedy which he could not understand; he wanted greetings and discussion, and attentions showered upon him as usual, and they were not forthcoming. He could not understand what had brought this state of things to pass, but no more could he question one who was so evidently removed from present conditions. With a sense of forlornness he had never known, he fell on his knees by her side and laid his head against her arm, seeking comfort, and when she still did not speak, the fullness of his misery became apparent, and he got up unsteadily and left the house. 345

Slowly life and returning interest awakened in the child; still more slowly did the mother take up her threads in the web of living. The old routine was established, with a few exceptions. Elizabeth arose early and prepared breakfast before sunrise as before, the washing and ironing were as well done, but when she prepared to clean the kitchen floor the first washday after Aunt Susan’s death, she took the mop down from its nail on the back porch and used it as she had done that first winter.

John and his mother came in with the clothes basket as she started to wring out the mop to wipe the first corner finished.

“Hadn’t I better get down and scrub it for you with the brush?” John asked.

“There will be no more of that in my kitchen,” replied Elizabeth, and she had quietly continued her work without looking up.

“Why not?” had been the astonished query.

“We will not argue it,” she had said in the same spiritless tone in which she always spoke those days, and had been so quietly determined that she got her way. John could not argue with a woman who was so unresistant of manner: to him, manner constituted argument. Elizabeth went her own quiet way and took no part in the things that went on about her unless her services were required, then she served faithfully and uncomplainingly, but she held converse with no one in the happy way of old.

Thus summer passed, and autumn also. Little Jack walked now and was beginning to lisp an occasional word, making of himself a veritable fairy in the household. With the close of the warm weather he grew less and less fretful, and when the first snow fell he became as happy and active as a kitten. The mother had kept him with her every minute, and when her work had been done, which was seldom, was satisfied to rock him and listen to his baby chatter. 346

Elizabeth had not been angry in the whole six months, neither had she been glad. She never vexed John by asking to be taken places. Gladly would he have taken her, if by so doing he could have brought back her old enthusiasm and girlish glee, for Elizabeth had been the life of the household, and things had settled into a dead monotony that made of their home but a house since Susan Hornby’s death. Sometimes, vexed by her passive acceptation of whatever came, John would throw out stinging observations about women who made their husbands turn to others for their society, and then be left in an uncomfortable situation by the fact that he had aroused neither anger nor annoyance, for Elizabeth would inquire in her lifeless tones what he wished her to do which was left undone. Puzzled by her real meekness of spirit, the man was compelled to admit that she made no vexatious demands upon him and that she laboured unceasingly to keep the soulless home in order. One of the strange and contradictory things in the situation was that John Hunter did not turn to the mother whom he had ever been ready to exalt for consolation in this time of trouble; the demand his feelings made was for the companionship which while it was his he had not desired. The revelation of the months showed him what he had lost. Mrs. Hunter was as much in the dark about the real cause of Elizabeth’s changed condition as was John. 347

“The ride to Mr. Hornby’s had something to do with it,” she said dubiously when talking the matter over with her son after the baby began to get well and Elizabeth showed no improvement in a mental way.

“It comes from that ride in the hot sun. You see it made the baby sick too; but it ain’t any use to say so to her,” John replied, but in spite of the firmness of his tone there was a puzzled look on

his face and the last word dragged with indecision.

“She was very fond of Mrs. Hornby, too, and that may have had something to do with it,” Mrs. Hunter observed.

“Ye-e-s-s-s!” John replied. “But she couldn’t care for that kind of people enough to make herself sick about them,” he said more firmly.

Mrs. Hunter considered slowly for some moments.

“I guess you’re right,” she said at last. “She seemed to be attached to them, but she don’t ask to go to see him since his wife’s death; and I should think now’s when her love for them would show out.”

“I wish to God she would ask to go anywhere. I’m tired of the kind of life we’re leading,” John said in a manner which supported his words.

The weariness of life was modified, or at least shifted from one shoulder to the other for John Hunter by the increasing burden of financial worries. In this also he was denied any comfort or 348
assistance from Elizabeth; she asked no questions, and if he talked of notes which were falling due, or of interest soon to be paid, she listened without remark, and moved about her endless round of cleaning, cooking, or sewing apparently absorbed in the work in hand. If he complained about expenses, the only reply he received was for the food on the table to be of a plainer quality and a lessened grocery bill the next time he went to town. This he would not permit, being sensitive about the opinions of the men who worked for him. Elizabeth never remarked upon the matter of keeping three men through the winter as she would have done a year ago when there was little to do which counted in farm affairs. She left her husband free to do as he chose on all those matters. She did not sulk; she had lost hope, she was temporarily beaten. In that first hour after her return from Aunt Susan’s death chamber she had meditated flight. She longed to get away, to go anywhere where she would never see her husband’s face again, but there was Jack. Jack belonged to his father as much as to her, and Elizabeth was fair. Besides, she was helpless about the support of the child. Her health was quite seriously interfered with by the ache in her back which was always present since the baby’s coming. She had told her mother but two short years before that she would not live with a man who would treat her as her father treated his wife, and here she found herself in those few months as enmeshed as her mother had ever been. Aye! even more so. Hers was a position even more to be feared, because it was more subtle, more intangible, more refined, and John’s rule as 349
determined and unyielding as that of Josiah Farnshaw.

Having failed to act in that first hour of her trouble, Elizabeth drifted into inaction. Even her thoughts moved slowly as she pondered on her situation; her thoughts moved slowly, but they moved constantly. Under all that quiet of manner was a slow fire of reasoning which was working things out. Gradually Elizabeth was getting a view of the real trouble. Two things absorbed her attention: one was the domination of men, and the other was the need of money adjustment. To live under the continual interference of a man who refused to listen to the story of one’s needs was bad enough, but to live without an income while one had a small child was worse. She would leave this phase of her difficulties at times and wander back to the character of the treatment she received and compare it to that accorded to her mother. It occasioned great surprise to find herself admiring her father’s manner more than that of her husband. Mr. Farnshaw had the virtue of frankness in his mastery, John used subterfuges; Mr. Farnshaw was openly brutal, John secretly heartless; her father was a domineering man, her husband even more determined, more inflexible. While considering the possibility of escape by running away, many things were clarified in Elizabeth’s mind regarding her position as a wife, and the position of all wives. She, for the first time, began to see the many whips which a determined husband had at his command, chief of which was the crippling processes of motherhood. She could not 350
teach school—Jack was too young; neither could she take any other work and keep the child with her. As she meditated upon the impossibility of the various kinds of work a woman could do, another phase of her situation arose before her: even if the baby were older, and a school easily obtained, the gossip that would follow a separation would be unendurable. Having accumulated a reputation for snobbishness and aristocratic seclusion, people would not neglect so rare an opportunity to even old scores. She would be a grass widow, a subject for all the vulgar jest and loathsome wit of the community. Country people know how to sting and annoy in a thousand ways. However, the possibility of this sort of retribution was put entirely away by the baby’s illness. By the time Jack had recovered, the young mother was worn to a lifeless machine, compelled to accept what came to her. Her youth, her health, her strength were gone; worse than all that, her interest in things, in her own affairs even, had almost gone.

John wandered about the house disconsolate and dissatisfied, and made amends in curious little ways, and from John’s standpoint. He opened relations with Elizabeth’s family and insisted upon taking her home for a visit. Elizabeth went with him, and accepted the more than half-willing recognition of her father, who wanted to get into communication with the baby. He was offering for sale a young team and John, thinking to do a magnanimous thing, bought Patsie. Elizabeth accepted the visit and the horse without emotions of any sort, and left her husband annoyed and 351
her family floundering in perplexity at her passive attitude toward life. At home that night he said to her sneeringly:

“No matter what a man does for you, you pout, and act as if you didn’t like it. If I don’t offer to take you you’re mad, and if I do you set around and act as if you were bored to death by having to go. What th’ devil’s a man to do?”

“I was perfectly willing to go,” was the reply, and she went on dressing Jack for bed without looking up.

John cast a baffled look at her as she carried the child out of the room, and returned to his uncomfortable thoughts without trying to talk of anything else when she returned and sat down to sew. The sitting room in which they spent their evenings was in perfect order; the whole house was never so orderly, nor their table better served, but John pined for companionship. The work he had worn her out in doing was never better performed, but there was no love in the doing, and when he addressed her, though her answer was always ready and kind, there was no love in it, and he was learning that our equity in the life of another has fixed and unalterable lines of demarkation.

Thus matters progressed till February, when Jake was called home to Iowa by the death of his mother. Jake had lived such a careless, happy-go-lucky sort of life that he was obliged to borrow a large part of his railroad fare from John Hunter, who was himself so badly in debt that he was wondering how he was to meet the interest which would fall due in May. John gave him the 352
money with the understanding that Jake would come back in time for the early seeding, and prepared to take him into town. Jake was the only man left on the farm, and there was consternation in John’s heart at the prospect of having all the chores thrown upon his own shoulders in cold weather. Jake had been the only reliable man he had ever been able to hire. The more independent sort of hired men resented John Hunter’s interference in the farm work, which they understood far better than he, and seldom stayed long, but Jake Ransom liked Elizabeth, was close friends with Luther Hansen, and since he saw the mistress of the house drooping and discouraged, doubly appreciated the home into which he had fallen. Jake had been devoted to Elizabeth with a dog-like devotion since his first meeting with her in the little schoolhouse six years before. He was more than glad that he could secure his return to the Hunter home by the simple method of borrowing money. More nearly than any one else in her whole circle of acquaintances, Jake Ransom had Elizabeth’s situation figured out. He wanted to come back to her service, and it was with a satisfied security that he helped prepare the bobsled for the trip to town. They went early and took Mrs. Hunter with them to do some shopping for herself and Elizabeth. John hoped to find a man who could come back with them that afternoon and help with the work of watering and feeding the hundred and fifty head of cattle that made of their farm life a busy round of daily toil.

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CHAPTER XV

HUGH NOLAND

Doctor Morgan folded his stethoscope and thrust it into his inner pocket.

“Your heart’s been pounding like that for seven years, you say?” he asked of the man sitting before him.

“Seven years in May,” was the brief answer.

The patient got up from the office chair and adjusted his waistcoat. The waistcoat was ample and covered a broad chest. The face also was broad, with a square chin, and eyes set well apart. The man was twenty-eight or thirty years old and nearly six feet in height.

“I know all you’ve got to tell me,” he said, going to the mirror to brush his tumbled hair. “They sent me out to find a place on a farm because medicine wouldn’t do anything for me. I’m tolerably comfortable if I don’t overdo—that is, if I stay out of doors while I’m doing. I don’t expect you to make a new man out of me; I only thought I’d have you look me over the first thing, because I might need you suddenly, and it’s better for you to know what sort of patient you’ve got beforehand.” He paused for an inspection of his well-groomed hands.

“You may not need me for years,” Doctor Morgan interrupted hastily. “That kind of a heart 354
outlasts the other organs sometimes. The doctor twisted the heavy-linked watch chain which dangled from his vest pocket as if calling upon it for words. Of course an out-of-doors life is best. What have you been doing of late?” he asked.

“Teaching in the old university since I got my degree, but they’ve sent me out like a broken-down fire horse. I’ll get used to it,” the young man said indifferently. He was accustomed to signs of hopelessness when his case was discussed, and was unmoved by them.

“Have you family ties?” the doctor asked. He liked the grit this man’s manner indicated.

“None that need to be counted,” was the brief reply.

The doctor noticed that his patient wasted no extra words in self-pity. “That’s good! It lessens a man’s worries. And—where are you staying, Mr. Noland?”

“At the hotel, till I get a place on a farm. Before I invest I’m going to get my bearings about farms, by working around till I get on to things. You don’t know of a place where a man could work for his board for a month till the spring seeding and things come on do you?”

He was pushing the cuticle back from his finger-nails as they talked, and Doctor Morgan smiled.

“Those hands don’t look much like farm work,” he said.

The man laughed easily. “Oh, that’s habit. I’ll get over it after a while.”

“You will if you work for these yahoos around here much. Why don’t you invest in land and have your own home right from the start? A man like you can’t live in the kind of houses and do the kind of work You’ll find in this country.”

“I wouldn’t work for myself—I’ve nothing to work for. When you take away a man’s chances to marry and live the normal life, you make a sluggard of him. I’ve got to have a partner, and have his interests to serve as well as my own, or I won’t work, and in the meantime I want to look about a bit before I pick up some one to go into business with. I won’t be long finding some one.”

“No whine in him,” was the doctor’s mental comment, but what he said was: “Well, You’ll find life about here a bit dull. Come in, and make yourself at home in this office while you’re in town, and I’ll see what I can do about finding a place for you.”

After he had watched his patient swing off up the street he considered the case seriously.

“College athletics do just about that sort of thing for a boy,” he said aloud. “Now I believe Silas Chamberlain would take him for his board, and there ain’t any children there. Children’s the devil in a farmhouse: no manners, and they set right on top of you, and if you say anything the folks are hurt. He’s a nice fellow, and I intend to hold on to him. It was like old times to talk for a while to a man that knows chemistry and things. I’ll see more of him. I’m gettin’ old altogether too fast in this blamed hole. I need some one to talk to that’s more like a man ought to be.”

CHAPTER XVI

REVIVIFYING FIRES

It was butchering day at Silas Chamberlain’s and Liza Ann had the household astir early. Luther Hansen was master of ceremonies in the backyard, and relieved Silas of the heavy lifting. It was a day for visiting and neighbourly activity as well as hard work. Hugh Noland had been sent to Silas the week before by Doctor Morgan, and assisted in rolling the pork barrel from the cellar door to a convenient post near the out-of-door fire, where they sunk the bottom of it into the frozen earth and carefully tilted it to the proper angle for scalding purposes.

“It’s fifteen years since I’ve been at ‘a killing,’ and I feel as if I were ten years old again,” Noland said as he watched the hard earth give way under the mattock Luther wielded.

“Go hunt a straw in that case, and I’ll see that you get the bladder. Shall I save you the pig’s tail?” Luther said as he settled the barrel into the cavity.

They swung the great iron kettle over the pile of kindling and corncobs laid ready for lighting, and then carried water to fill it.

As the last bucket was emptied into the kettle, Luther turned and swung his cap at John Hunter and Jake, who were passing in the bobsled.

“Hunters,” he explained. “Have you met them yet?”

“No,” replied Noland. “Who are they? He drives a good team.”

“Nearest neighbours on th’ west over there,” Luther said, pointing to the roofs of the Hunter place, plainly to be seen over the rise of land between. “They’re th’ folks for you t’ know—th’ only ones with book-learnin’ around here. Goin’ t’ stay with th’ Chamberlains long?”

“No,” replied the other, with a look of reticence; “that is, only for a time. He don’t hire much, he tells me. I’m just helping him till he gets his fencing tightened up and this work done. Why?”

“Well, I was just a thinkin’ that that’s th’ place for you. Hunter hires a lot of work done, and—and you’d like each other. You’re th’ same kind of folks. I wonder how he come t’ be takin’ ’is man along t’ town with ’im? Th’ was a trunk in th’ back of the sled too, but that may ’a’ been for Mrs. Hunter. That was ’is mother with ’im.”

There was not much time to speculate about future work, there was much to be done in the present, and before noon five limp bodies had been dragged from the pens to the scalding barrel, plunged into the steaming water, turned, twisted, turned again, and after being churned back and forth till every inch of the black hides was ready to shed its coat of hair and scarf-skin, were drawn out upon the wheelbarrow. Then a gambol-stick was thrust through the tendons of the hind legs and the hogs were suspended from a cross pole about six feet from the ground, where they hung while the great corn-knives scraped and scratched and scrubbed and scoured till the black bodies gradually lost their coating and became pink and tender looking and perfectly clean. They were then drawn and left to cool and stiffen.

The sloppy, misty weather made the work hard because of the frozen earth under the melting snow, and the steaming, half foggy atmosphere was too warm for comfort of men working over an open fire and a steaming barrel of hot water, but by noon the butchering was finished. To the new man it was a journey back to childhood. How well he remembered the various features of preparation: the neighbours asked in to assist, the odours pleasant and unpleasant, the bustling about of his mother as she baked and boiled and stewed for the company, the magic circle about the pens from which he was excluded when the men went forth with the rifle, and the squeal which followed the rifle's crack, and the fear which gripped him when he thought the poor pig was hurt, but which was explained away by his father, who, proud of his marksmanship, assured him that "that pig never knew what hit it."

In addition to the fact that the man had spent his childhood on a farm, he had the happy faculty of entering into the life of the people among whom he found himself. He entertained the little group at the dinner table that day with a description of his mother's soap-making, and discussed the best ways of preparing sausage for summer use as if he himself were a cook; and as Luther listened he was convinced that the Hunter home was the proper place for him to settle down. 359

At two o'clock Luther started home with some spareribs, wrapped in one of Liza Ann's clean towels, under his arm. It was early, but nothing more could be done at Silas's house till the carcasses were cold enough to cut and trim, and, besides, there was an ominous looking bank of dull gray cloud in the northwest. Luther swung along the road toward the west energetically.

The wind gave a little twisting flurry, and dropped completely when he was about halfway between Chamberlain's and the Hunter place. A few minutes later there was a puff of wind from the opposite direction, succeeded by a feeling of chill. Luther scanned the horizon and stepped faster. When the advance guard of fine snow began to sift down from the leaden sky above, he started to run. He had lived in the north, and knew the meaning of the rapidly darkening sky. The signs were unmistakable. Presently the fine flakes began to rush along toward the south with greater force. The wind came on steadily now. Luther looked about anxiously, making a note of the location of things. It was still a quarter of a mile to Hunter's. As he peered ahead, wishing himself nearer protection, with a roar the blizzard fell upon him, blotting out the landscape before him as completely as if a curtain had fallen between.

With all his might Luther struggled forward. The wind came from the right side and almost carried him from his feet. He had been standing over a steaming kettle and scalding barrel most 360 of the day, and the icy blast went through him, chilling his blood instantly. Luther knew his danger. This was not a cyclone where men were carried away by the winds of summer; this was a winter's storm where men could freeze to death, and men froze quickly in blizzards. The driving particles of snow and ice made it impossible to look ahead. He shielded his face with his right arm, and tried, as he hurried forward, to keep in mind the exact direction of the Hunter house. If he could only reach that he would be safe. The road was a new one, recently opened, and not well defined. It was almost at once obliterated. Little needles of ice thrust themselves at him with stinging force, and he could not see; the blinding snow whirled and whistled about his feet, and in five minutes Luther Hansen realized that he had got out of the road. He stopped in alarm and, turning his back to the storm, tried to see about him. The gray wall of snow completely obscured every object from his sight. He had a sense of being the only thing alive in the universe; all else seemed to have been destroyed. His every nerve ached with the cold, but peer about as he would he could not possibly tell where he was. He remembered that there had been a cornfield on his right, and thought that he must have gone too far south, for he was certainly in the meadow now. The pressure of the wind, he reflected, would naturally carry him in that direction, so he faced around and started on, bearing stubbornly toward the north. Every fibre in him shook; no cold he had ever felt in Minnesota was equal to this; there was a quality 361 in the pressure of this cold that was deadly. The wind pierced in spite of every kind of covering. Real fear began to lay hold upon him. He stumbled easily; the action of his limbs began to give him alarm. The package of spareribs fell from under his arm, and he stooped to pick it up. As he bent over the wind caught him like a tumble-weed and threw him in a shivering heap on the ground. He had worn no mittens in the morning, and his hands stung as if tortured by the lashes of many whips. To ease their hurt he remained huddled together with his back to the wind while he breathed on his freezing fingers, but remembered that that was the surest way to add to the nip of the cold in a blast which condensed the breath from his mouth into icicles before it had time to get away from his moustache. Staggering to his feet, he stumbled on toward the Hunter house, trying as hard as his fast benumbing senses would permit to bear toward the wind and the cornfield at the right. He had not picked up the package—had forgotten it in fact—and now he tried to beat his freezing hands across his shoulders as he ran. The bitter wind could not be endured, and he crossed his hands, thrusting them into his sleeves, hoping to warm them somehow on his wrists; but with eyes uncovered he could not gauge his steps, and stumbled and fell. Unable to get his hands out of his sleeves in time to protect himself, he tripped forward awkwardly and scratched his face on the cut stubs of the meadow-grass. Evidently he had not reached the road as yet. He knew the road so well that he could have kept it with a bandage 362 over his eyes but for the wind which thrust him uncertainly from his course. It was that which was defeating him. Try as he would, he could not keep his attention fixed upon the necessity of staying near that cornfield. Determined to find it before he proceeded farther toward the west, he faced the wind squarely, and, bracing his body firmly, hurried as fast as he could toward the stalkfield.

After a time he seemed to wake up; he was not facing the wind, and he was aching miserably. Luther Hansen knew what that meant: he was freezing. Already the lethargy of sleep weighted

each dragging foot. He thought of the nest an old sow had been building in the pen next to the one where the killing had been done that day. With the instincts of her kind, the mother-pig had prepared for the storm by making a bed where it would be sheltered. Luther's mind dwelt lingeringly upon its cozy arrangement; every atom of his body craved shelter. Death by freezing faced him already, though he had been in the grip of the storm but one short quarter of an hour. He had lost consciousness of time: he only knew that he was freezing within sight of home. Nothing but action could save him. Nerving himself for another trial, the bewildered man turned toward the north and walked into the very teeth of the storm, searching for the lost trail. Sometimes he thought his foot had found it; then it would be lost again. He wandered on hours, days, weeks—he wandered shivering over the meadow, the road, the state of Kansas—over the whole globe and through all space, till at last a great wall shut off the offending wind, the roar 363
of the planets lessened, and the numb and frozen man fell forward insensible, striking his head against a dark obstruction thrusting its shoulder through a bank of dirty gray snow.

The sound of a heavy body falling on her doorstep brought Elizabeth Hunter to the door. She opened it cautiously. The snow swirled in as it was drawn back and the heated air of the sitting room rushed out, forming a cloud of steam which almost prevented her from seeing the helpless figure at her feet. She could not distinguish the features, but it was a man, and the significance of his presence was plain. Seizing him about the body, Elizabeth dragged him into the house, and shut the door behind him to keep out the blast.

"Luther Hansen!" she exclaimed.

Finding that she could not arouse him, she pulled the relaxed and nerveless form to the lounge, but when she attempted to lift the limp figure to the couch she found it almost more than all her woman's strength could accomplish. Luther stirred and muttered, but could not be awakened sufficiently to help himself, and it was only after some minutes and the putting forth of every ounce of strength that the girl had that he was at last stretched upon the lounge. Elizabeth brought blankets to cover the shivering, muttering, delirious man, and having heard that the frost must be drawn gradually from frozen extremities, and being unable to get his hands and feet into cold water, she brought and wrapped wet towels about them, and chafed his frozen 364
face.

It was a long time before the white nose and cheeks began to show colour; then the ears became scarlet, and pain began to sting the man into consciousness. The chafing hurt, and Luther fought off the hands that rubbed so tenderly.

Gradually Luther Hansen awoke to his surroundings. Delirium and reality mixed helplessly for some moments. He remembered his struggles to reach the Hunter house, but the gap in the train of his affairs made him suspect that this was a phase of delirium and that he was in reality freezing. He was stinging all over. He wanted to find out where he was, and tried to get upon his feet.

"You are right here in my house, Luther," Elizabeth said, holding him on his pillow.

Luther relaxed and lay looking at her for some time before he asked:

"How did I get here, Lizzie?"

"I don't know, Luther," she replied. "I heard you fall on the doorstep. I never was so surprised. How did you come to be out—and without mittens too?"

She removed the wet towel from one of his hands, and he drew it away with a groan.

"I expect, Lizzie, it's frozen. You better rub it with snow."

The question of how he reached her house puzzled Luther throughout the long afternoon and evening, while they listened to the roar of the wind and talked of the unsheltered cattle in the 365
many Kansas stalkfields.

"The only thing that kept our cattle from being out of doors was the fact that Jake had to go to Iowa and John had to take him to town," Elizabeth had said at one point.

"Has Jake left for good?" Luther asked hesitatingly. He knew John's unpopularity with the men who worked for him and was a little afraid to ask Elizabeth, who might be sensitive about it.

"No. Jake has lost his mother, but he'll come back for the spring seeding. Jake's a good man; he and John seem to get along pretty well." It was Elizabeth's turn to speak hesitatingly. She did not know how much Luther knew of John's affairs with his men, nor what opinion Jake might have expressed to Luther.

"Jake's a curious cub! He's been your dog, Lizzie, ever since that school business. I've heard 'im tell it over twenty times."

"I wish we could find another like him," Elizabeth said wistfully. "John isn't able to take care of all this stock unless he gets a man in Colebyville to-day, and—and if he did, the man, as likely as not, wouldn't stay more than a week or two."

Luther Hansen looked up eagerly.

"Lizzie, I've found th' very man for you folks. He'll stay too. He's a fellow by th' name of Noland —workin' for Chamberlain, an' wants a job right soon—got a lot of book-learnin'—just your kind." 366

"I'll have John see him when he gets home," Elizabeth answered indifferently. "My! I wonder when they will be able to get back?" she added.

“They wasn’t through tradin’ when this thing come on,” Luther replied. “Anyhow, houses was too thick t’ get lost th’ first half of th’ way. Listen to that wind, though! I’m glad t’ be here if I do look like a turkey gobbler with these ears,” he laughed.

It was so cold that Elizabeth had built a roaring fire, and to keep the snow, which penetrated every crack, from sifting under the door, she laid old coats and carpets across the sill. She brought coal and cobs from the shed, stopping each trip to get warm, for even to go the twenty steps required to get to the cobhouse was to experience more cold than she had ever encountered in all the days when she had plowed through the snows of Kansas winters while teaching; in fact, had the fuel been much farther from her door she would hardly have ventured out for it at all in a wind which drove one out of his course at every fresh step and so confused and blinded him that the points of the compass were a blank, and paths could not be located for the drifts, which ran in every direction the swirling wind chose to build them. She had gone around the shed to the back door, knowing that the front door being on the windward side could not be shut again if once opened, and the few extra steps necessary to creep around the building froze her to the bone, for the eddying wind had carried the snow deep at that point and, being enough sheltered to prevent packing, had left it a soft pile into which she sank 367
almost to her waist. She was obliged to hunt for a shovel and clear the snow out of the doorway when she was through, and her hands were completely numbed when she reached the house after it was over. With the feeling that she might not be able to reach the shed at all in the morning, or that the doors might be drifted shut altogether, Elizabeth had taken enough cobs and coal into the kitchen to half fill the room and was ready to withstand a siege of days, but she paid toll with aching hands and feet that frightened Luther into a new realization of the nature of the storm.

When at last the one fire Elizabeth thought it wise to keep up was rebuilt and dry shoes had replaced the wet ones, she settled down beside the lounge, with her feet in another chair to keep them off the cold floor, and turned to Luther expectantly.

“This storm’s awful, as you say,” she said in reply to his observation that it might hold for days, “but I’m just so glad of a real chance for a visit with you that I’m quite willing to bring cobs and keep fires.”

“If that’s true, why don’t you come t’ see us as you ought t’, Lizzie?” Luther said, looking her searchingly in the eye. “I never meddle in other people’s business, but you ain’t th’ stuck-up thing folks says you are. Honest now, why don’t you do as a neighbour should?”

Elizabeth Hunter’s face flushed crimson and she leaned forward to tuck the old coat, in which she had wrapped her feet, more closely about them while she took time to get herself ready to answer the paralyzing question. The longer she waited the harder it became to meet the kindly 368
questioning eyes bent upon her, and the more embarrassing it became to answer at all. She fumbled and tucked and was almost at the point of tears when Jack, who was asleep on a bed made on two chairs, began to fret. Seizing the welcome means of escape, she got up and took the child, sitting down a little farther away from Luther and hugging the baby as if he were a refuge from threatened harm.

Luther felt the distance between them, but decided to force the issue. He came about it from another quarter, but with inflexible determination.

“I hope Sadie got her kindling in before the storm began. It’ll be awful cold in th’ mornin’, and—I do wish I could ’a’ got home. Sadie’s fires always go out.”

“Your cobs are closer to the house than mine; Sadie ’ll get along all right.”

“How do you know where our cobhouse is now, Lizzie? You ain’t seen it for over a year,” Luther observed quietly. And when Elizabeth did not reply, said with his eyes fastened on Jack’s half-asleep face: “I wonder how Janie is?”

Glad to talk of anything but herself and her own affairs, Elizabeth answered with feverish readiness the last half of Luther’s observation.

“You never told me what the baby’s name was before. Isn’t it sweet?”

“Do you know, Lizzie, that Sadie ’d most made ’er mind up t’ call it after you, if it was a girl, if you’d ’a’ come t’ be with ’er when it was born, as you said you would?” Luther looked at her 369
almost tenderly, and with a yearning beyond words.

“After me? She didn’t send for me when she was sick, Luther.”

“No, but she would ’a’, if you’d ’a’ come as you ought t’ ’a’ done them months when she wasn’t goin’ out.” He looked at her penetratingly.

“I haven’t been anywhere since Aunt Susan’s death,” Elizabeth evaded, determined not to recognize his trend.

“You could ’a’ come before her death, there was plenty of time. Now look here, I ain’t goin’ t’ beat about th’ bush. I’m talkin’ square. You can’t git away from me. You’ve had th’ best chance a woman ever had t’ help another woman, an’ you didn’t take it. Sadie was that took by what you said about bein’ glad for th’ chance t’ have your baby, an’ th’ idea of helpin’ him t’ have th’ best disposition you could give ’im, that she didn’t talk of nothin’ else for weeks, an’ she looked for you till she was sick, an’ you never come. I want t’ know why?”

Elizabeth Hunter had come to the judgment-bar; she could not escape these cross-questions, neither could she answer. Her face grew white as Luther Hansen looked searchingly into it, and

her breath came hard and harder as he looked and waited. This chance to talk to Luther was like wine to her hungry soul, but John Hunter was her husband and she refused to accuse him even after the long months of despair she had suffered at his hands. Luther let her gather herself for her reply, not adding a word to the demand for truth and friendship. How he trusted her in spite of it all! He watched her indecision change to indignation at his insistence, and he saw her head grow clear as she decided upon her course.

“I will not discuss the past with you, Luther,” she said slowly, as one who comes to a conclusion as he proceeds. “I cannot tell you all the things which have led up to it. I am going to ask you not to mention it to me again, but I will try to do it better next time. I had no idea that Sadie cared whether I came to see her or not; she had always seemed to dislike me.” Elizabeth added the last hesitatingly lest she hurt Luther’s feelings.

“Lizzie, I won’t be put off. If you don’t want t’ tell me *why* you’ve done as you have, I won’t ask you t’, but you’ve got t’ let me talk t’ you about it all th’ same. I ain’t a man t’ let myself mix up in my neighbours’ affairs, but, Lizzie, you ought t’ live up t’ th’ things God’s put int’ your power t’ do. Now, then, you let folks get a wrong idea of you. You’ve got more education ’n anybody else’s got in this country, an’ you’ve got more money, an’ you’ve got more everything ’n th’ rest of us, an’ what’s it been give t’ you for if it ain’t goin’ t’ come t’ nothin’? Here you’ve had th’ best chance t’ do somethin’ for a neighbour woman a woman ever had: Sadie’s been that took with th’ things you said about children that she was ready t’ listen t’ you on anything, an’ you won’t let ’er have a chance t’ get at you at all—an’ ain’t she come out? You’d have t’ live with ’er, Lizzie, t’ know what that little woman’s done fur herself this last year—an’ it was you that helped t’ do it. Honest, now, don’t you see yourself that if you’ve had things give t’ you that th’ rest ain’t had that you owe somethin’ t’ th’ rest of us?”

In all the weary discordant time when she had struggled for better conditions Elizabeth Hunter had never thought of anything in the situation but the bettering of her own surroundings. It had been the suffering of blind stupidity, of youth, of the human being too deeply submerged to think of aught but personal affairs. Luther drew her attention to the main facts of her life, drawing her away from self. It was a simple occurrence, a simple subject, a simple question: it was in itself the reason for the perpetuation of their friendship. The winds blew, the snow found its way under door and sash and heaped itself in ridges across the floor, and in spite of the roaring fire they were not always warm, but throughout the night Elizabeth sat beside her lifelong friend and drew in a revivifying fire which was to remould and make over a life which had almost flickered to a smouldering resentment and inactivity.

CHAPTER XVII

ADJUSTING DOMESTIC TO SOCIAL IDEALS

The next morning the wind blew the fine snow in one vast driving cloud; it was impossible to see a hundred feet. Elizabeth knew that the stock was suffering, but was almost certain that she could not reach them. It would not be hard to reach the barn, since the wind would be with her, but to return would be a different matter. To feel that she had done all that she could, she went as far as the gate, and when she could not see the house from that point was sufficiently warned and struggled back to safety. No sound but that of the storm came to her even at the gate, but she was certain that the famishing cattle were calling for food. Her day was consumed in the care of Luther’s inflamed hands and feet. The only remedy she knew was wet cloths and she worked anxiously to reduce the swelling and congestion.

About four o’clock the wind dropped. Though the air was still full of fine snow, Elizabeth wrapped herself in John’s old overcoat and muffler, and putting a pair of Jake’s heavy mittens on her hands, and taking the milkpails on her arm to save a trip back for them, she went to the barn.

The barn door stuck, with the snow which had collected in the runway, and she had to fumble for some time before it would come open. A perfect babel of voices greeted her. Jake had left the south door of the barn ajar when he left that morning, and the eddying snow had banked itself along the entire centre of the building. Patsie stood in the stall nearest the door, humped up with the cold, and with a layer of snow on her hips and spreading black tail. She turned sidewise and pawed furiously, giving shrill little whinnies as Elizabeth seized a half-bushel measure and waded through the snow to the oats bin.

“No, corn’s better this cold weather,” the girl said aloud, and hurried to the other bin. Soon the horses were making noise enough to inflame the appetites of the other animals, who redoubled their cries.

She investigated the pens and found the hogs in good condition, but the drifts so high as to make it possible for them to make neighbourly visits from pen to pen, and even into the cattle yard. It was a struggle to carry the heavy ear corn from the crib to the pens, but it was done, and then Elizabeth turned her attention to the excited cattle.

Taking time to rest and get her breath, Elizabeth noticed that a few of the hogs had not come to get their feed, and went to investigate the cause. They seemed to be fighting over some choice morsel on the far side of the cattle yard. At first she thought that it was one of their number that they were fighting about, but as she approached the knot, one of them ran off to one side dragging something, its head held high to avoid stepping on the grewsome thing it carried. One of the young cows had lost her calf in the freezing storm, and the hogs were fighting over its torn and mangled body. Elizabeth sought out the little mother, and segregating her from the herd, drove her into the straw cow-stable, where she would be sheltered. The other milch cows had been left in their stalls by the men the day before, and snorted and tugged at their ropes as the newcomer appeared. Elizabeth tied the heifer, and then shut the door after her and returned to the unprotected herd outside.

The fodder was so full of snow that it was impossible for the girl to handle it at all, so she dug the ladder out of the snow and placed it against the long hayrick beside the fence and forked the hay over into the racks below. It required every ounce of strength she had to throw the hay clear of the stack and in line with the racks where the cattle could reach it, but the girl worked with a will, while the cattle fought for best places, or any place at all, and reached hungry tongues for the sweet hay.

Elizabeth worked with joy and energy. The mood of the storm was upon the girl. Not before in all the months she had been married had she ever moved in perfect freedom in her native out-of-doors element. It was a gift of the gods and not to be despised or neglected, for to-morrow would come John—and prison bars. Before she had begun, she faced the wind, and with bounding joy looked over the drifted fields toward the north and northeast. The air was clearing. The world looked different from this lofty position. She was Elizabeth again, Elizabeth transformed and made new. The lethargy of recent months had slipped away; something about the rush and motion of things in the last twenty-four hours inspired her; the fierce winds of yesterday and to-day stirred her spirit to do, to be in motion herself. They had communicated their energy, their life, their free and ungoverned humour. Elizabeth's thoughts ran on as fast as her blood. She thought of Luther, and of all he had said to her, of her neglected opportunities which he had pointed out to her, and wondered modestly if he were right, and then knew that he was. She thought of how she, the out-of-door prisoner of her father's home, had become the indoor prisoner of her husband's home. She had thought that to marry and escape her father's grasp was to possess herself; but Elizabeth Hunter saw that as a wife she was really much less free. She thought of the sacrifices she had made in the hope of securing harmony, and she thought of the futility of it all. She decided that if a woman were enslaved it was because she herself permitted it, that to yield where she should stand fast did not secure a man's love, it only secured his contempt and increased his demands. In the three years she had been married she had not been permitted an hour of real companionship until the accident of this storm had brought an old friend to her door and kept him there till she had had a chance to realize the mental depths to which she had fallen in her isolation. In all the time she had been married she had not thought of anything but the bare details of their daily life. A woman had to have the association of congenial people to keep her from falling into housekeeping dry-rot. For thirty-six hours she had possessed herself, and in that time she had renewed her youth and acquired a new outlook. As she stood looking across the fields, her eyes fell on Nathan Hornby's chimney. The wind had dropped so completely that the air had cleared of snow, and the curling smoke from a freshly built fire arose in the frosty air, sending a thrill of homesickness through her as she pictured the orderly kitchen in which that fire was built. Was it orderly now that its guardian angel was gone? The hideous cruelty of a neglect which kept her from knowing whether it was well kept swept over her. Once she would have spent herself in emotionalism and tears at remembrance of it, but Elizabeth had advanced.

"I'll go and see him to-morrow, or as soon as the roads are fit," was her resolve. "Luther's right; he usually is."

The cattle calling from below brought her back to the necessities of the hour. Laying hold of the frosty pitchfork she renewed her attack upon the hay and continued till the racks were filled. By the time the ladder was put away again her hands were stinging till it was impossible to work, and she ran to the barn where she could put them against Patsie's flank while she blew her warm breath upon them. Patsie was ticklish, and twitched her loose hide nervously and gnawed at her feed-box with little squeals of excitement. The feed-box was of two-inch lumber instead of the usual sort. It was like all John did: so much attention put in one place there was no time for the rest; well done, but much left undone. Everything about John's barn was orderly and well built. There had been a time when she had rejoiced at what seemed to be thrift, but to-day she saw it from a new angle; Mr. Farnshaw had wastefully let his machinery rot and his stock perish from cold, but here was wastefulness of another sort; Elizabeth speculated on the cost of this barn and thought of the interest to be paid.

On her way to the cow-stable where the little mother whose calf had fallen a victim to the cold awaited her, she thought of the toolroom where she had gone for her feed. A forty-dollar set of harness hung there: Carter's harness had chains instead of leather tugs, and would outwear them several times over. It was an orderly toolroom: the bridles occupied a row over the collars, hames and back-bands came next, and on the other side of the room, on six-inch spikes, hung extra clevises, buckles, straps, and such materials as accidents to farm machinery required. John's mending was well provided for and well done. Elizabeth would have loved just this sort of order if it had not been so costly.

The little cow was so hungry that she hardly knew that she was giving her milk into a foreign

receptacle till a voice at the stable door made her jump so violently that the pail was knocked over and Elizabeth had to scramble hastily to avoid a similar fate.

“Well, now, there you be! Gosh-a-livin’s!——”

Silas Chamberlain never finished that speech. The milk from the rolling pail spattered over his feet as he sprang to Elizabeth’s rescue. The little cow tore at the rope that held her, and every mate she had in the stable joined her in snorting and threatening to bolt over the mangers. The old man, “So-bossied,” and vented all the soothing cattle talk he could command while he looked on in embarrassed confusion.

“Now ain’t that jes’ like me?” he queried in dismay. “Look what I’ve gone an’ done!” He picked up the empty pail and handed it to the man that was with him to keep it from being trampled upon by the plunging cows, while he tried to establish confidential relations with them.

“Never mind, Mr. Chamberlain. She’s only a heifer and never milked before. She wouldn’t have let me get that far without trouble, anyhow, if she hadn’t been so hungry. The hogs killed her calf last night or this morning and I thought I’d milk her before I began on the rest. I don’t suppose John can get home before to-morrow night, and the chores had to be done. Here, there’s an extra bucket or two. Do you want to help milk? they’ll quit fussing in a minute.”

“Course I do. That’s what Noland an’ I come for. This is Mrs. Hunter, Noland,” Silas said, remembering formalities at the last moment. “We thought John wouldn’t ’a’ got back ’fore th’ storm come on. Now let’s get this milkin’ done ’fore dark or we’ll be havin’ t’ ask for a lantern.”

“Oh! Mr. Chamberlain, I forgot to tell you that Luther Hansen got caught in the storm and nearly froze,” Elizabeth said when they had settled themselves to the work. “He’s at our house now; his feet and hands are awful. I think they’re all right, but I wish we could get at Doctor Morgan.”

The old man nearly upset the milk a second time in his astonishment, and the milking was cut as short as could decently be done so as to get to the house. The early winter night had settled down and the sting of the cold was paralyzing as they hastened in. Silas went straight to Luther, and Elizabeth and the new man brought a fresh supply of coal and cobs before they went in. They met Silas coming out as they carried the last basketful from the shed.

“I’m goin’ right over t’ tell Sadie,” he announced. “I brought Noland over to help, but Luther says you’re goin’ t’ need ’im right along, an’ I’ll jes’ leave ’im for good. You’ll like each other an’ he’ll want t’ stay as bad as You’ll want ’im.”

Silas had poured the whole arrangement out, and as it was about what was necessary it was accepted.

The presence of a stranger necessitated more formal housekeeping, and when the new man came back from helping Silas saddle Patsie he found the kitchen in order and the savoury smell of fresh biscuits and ham. A small table was placed beside Luther, and the ham and hot things had a seasoning of brilliant, intellectual conversation, for the man from college was adept at entertaining his fellow men and showed his best powers.

Elizabeth was too tired to stay awake long and she left him and Luther chatting, after she had shown Mr. Noland where he was to sleep and had filled the cold bed with hot flatirons to take the chill from the icy sheets. However happy she may have been while feeding the stock, she had to acknowledge that the loss of sleep the night before and the unaccustomed use of the pitchfork had made of her bed a desirable place. She awoke when the stranger went up the stairs, but was asleep before his footsteps had reached the room above her. A tantalizing remembrance of his face disturbed her for a moment, but only for a moment, and then tired nature carried her back to the land of dreams. She had seen him somewhere, but where, she was too sleepy to think out.

The next morning Silas came with his bobsled and they helped Luther into a chair and carried him in it to the sled and so to his home. John and his mother came a little after noon, and the girl watched to see how her husband would like the new man, half afraid that because she had secured him in John’s absence that he would not like him, and she wished it might be possible to keep him with them. She need not have worried, for Hugh Noland had looked about the place and decided to make himself so necessary to its proprietor that his presence would be desired, and he had gifts which favoured him in that respect. Besides, John had been unsuccessful in obtaining help and was overjoyed to come home and find the cattle fed and everything at the barn in good order. Patsie and her mate were hitched to the lumber wagon and stood waiting in the lane when John came and Jack was being wrapped in his warmest cloak.

“Where on earth are you going?” John asked in profound astonishment.

“I told Mr. Noland to hitch up and take me to Uncle Nathan’s, but now that you are here, you can go if you wish,” Elizabeth replied quietly. “I should have gone a long time ago. Will you go along mother, or will you stay at home after climbing these drifts all day? I think now that you’re at home we’ll take the sled instead of the wagon. You won’t mind making the change, will you?”

She ended by addressing the new man, and it was all so naturally done that John Hunter swallowed whatever was uncomfortable in it. He would not go himself, and Elizabeth set off with the stranger, glad of the chance to do so.

“I’ll drive right home and help with things there. What time shall I come back for you?” Noland asked as he set her on the ground as near Nathan’s doorstep as he could get the team to go.

“Not till after five. Mother’s there and I’ll let her get your suppers, and I’ll get mine here with Uncle Nate.”

It was such a perfectly normal arrangement that Hugh Noland did not guess that there was anything new in it. He drove away with a feeling of disappointment because he had been unable to draw her into conversation on the way over. She had proven herself a good conversationalist at meals and he looked forward to a time when he would be a permanent part of that household. Luther and Silas had been right. Here was the partner he was looking for if he could only make himself appreciated.

He had laid out every faculty and put it to the best use for that purpose and had been a bit disconcerted to have her suddenly become uncommunicative.

Nathan was at the barn; he saw them stop and recognized his visitor.

“Humph!” he snorted in disgust. However, a man could not leave a woman with a baby in her arms standing on his doorstep on a raw February day.

“How do you do, Uncle Nate?” the girl said timidly as soon as he was near enough to accost.

Nathan’s greeting was short and inhospitable. He did not offer to shake hands, nor pretend to see the hand she extended to him. Instead, he opened the door and invited her gruffly to enter. Closing the door behind them, he went to the stove and began to stir the fire industriously.

Elizabeth saw that she must have the difficulty over at once or her courage would wilt. Setting Jack on the floor, she went to Nathan and put her hand on his arm detainingly.

“You have fire enough, Uncle Nate. Let me talk to you.”

“Well?” he said briefly.

The girl was staggered by the nature of her reception. It was worse than she had expected. Luther Hansen’s estimate of the real situation had been only too right. She stood before Nathan Hornby trembling and disconcerted by the wall of his silence. The old kitchen clock ticked loudly, she could hear her own pulses, and the freshly stirred fire roared—roared in a rusty and unpolished stove. Dust lay thick on the unswept floor. Nathan needed her. She would win her way back to his heart.

“Uncle Nate, I don’t blame you one bit if you aren’t nice to me. I haven’t deserved it, but——”

“I guess you needn’t ‘Uncle Nate’ me any more,” he said when she paused.

His speech was bitter and full of animosity, but it was better than his compelling silence.

“I don’t blame you one bit for being mad at me——I should think you would be. I don’t know what I’m going to say to you either, but I’ve come to beg your forgiveness,” she stammered.

Nathan Hornby did not speak, but waited coldly for her to continue. There was plainly no help offered her.

“I—I can’t explain, Uncle Nate—I am going to call you so—you—you shall not put me away. I have come for your forgiveness and—and I’m going to stay till I get it. I—I can’t explain—there—there are things in life that we can’t explain, but I’m innocent of this stuck-up business you think I’ve had. I—I’ve loved you and Aunt Susan. Oh, Uncle Nate, I’ve loved her better than I ever did my own mother,” she ended with a sob.

There was the voice of honesty in what she said, but Nathan remembered his wrongs.

“If that’s so, why didn’t you come t’ see ’er?” he said. “If you loved ’er, why’d you let ’er go down to ’er grave a pinin’ for you? She looked for you till she was crazy ’most, an’ she never got a decent word out of you, nor a decent visit neither. If you loved ’er, what’d you act that way for?”

The memory of that last day, when his wife had yearned so pitifully for this girl, arose before him as he stood there, and shook his faith in the honesty of Elizabeth’s purposes in spite of the earnestness of her manner.

“That is the one thing I cannot explain, Uncle Nate,” Elizabeth answered. “I—I was all ready to come that day and—and—then I couldn’t.”

She buried her face in her hands at the memory of it and burst into tears.

“Is it true that Hunter won’t take you anywhere?” he asked pointedly.

“You have been listening to the Cranes,” she answered.

“I’ve been listenin’ t’ more’n them,” he said with the fixed purpose of drawing her out on the subject. “I’ve been listenin’ t’ some as says you’re too high and mighty t’ associate with th’ likes of us—an’ I’ve heard it said that your husband won’t take you nowhere. Now I just naturally know that a man can’t shut a woman up in this American country, so’s she can’t go anywhere she wants t’, if she wants t’ bad enough; an’ I remember how Hunter was ’fore ’e married you; ’e was always on th’ go—an’ there’s a nigger in th’ woodpile somewheres.”

Elizabeth was for the moment staggered. What he said was so true. And yet, how untrue! It was hard to think with the eye of suspicion on her. Appearances were against her, but she was determined not to discuss the privacies of her married life. She paused and looked Nathan squarely in the face till she could control her reasoning faculties.

“That is neither here nor there,” she said quite firmly at last. “I shall not defend myself to you, Uncle Nate, nor explain away bad reports. It would not help me and it would not help you. What

I am here for is to offer you my love *now*. What I want you to believe is that I mean it, that I've wanted to come, that I'm here because I want to be here, and that I never mean to neglect you again. I—I couldn't come to see her—but, oh, Uncle Nate, mayn't I come to see you? I can't tell you all the little ins and outs of why I haven't come before, but you must believe me."

Elizabeth ended imploringly.

The man was softened by her evident sincerity in spite of himself, and yet his wound was of long standing, his belief in her honesty shaken, his beloved wife in her grave, assisted to her final stroke by this girl's neglect, and he could not lay his bitterness aside easily. He did not speak.

The silence which followed was broken only by the ticking of the old-fashioned Seth Thomas clock and the roar of the fire.

Elizabeth looked around the familiar room in her dilemma, entangled in the mesh of her loyalty to her husband's dubious and misleading actions. Nearly every article in that room was associated with some tender recollection in the girl's mind. Not even the perplexity of the 386
moment could entirely shut out the reminiscent side of the occasion. The bread-board, dusty and unused, leaned against the flour barrel, the little line above it where the dishtowels should hang sagged under the weight of a bridle hung there to warm the frosty bit, the rocking chair, mended with broom wire after the cyclone, and on its back Aunt Susan's chambray sunbonnet where it had fallen from its nail: all familiar. With a little cry Elizabeth fell on her knees by Nathan Hornby's side.

"Oh, Uncle Nate! you can't tell what others have to contend with, and—and you must not even ask, but——" She could not proceed for sobs.

Nathan Hornby's own face twitched and trembled with emotion. The girl had unconsciously used Susan's own last words. His heart was touched. Susan's great love for Elizabeth pleaded for her.

"Can't I come, Uncle Nate? Won't you be friends with me?"

And Nathan Hornby, who wanted her friendship, answered reluctantly:

"Yes-s-s—come along if you want t'. You won't find it a very cheerful place t' come to, but she'd be glad t' know you're here, I guess."

Jack, sitting in his shawls and wraps on the floor, began to cry. He had been neglected long enough. His mother got suddenly to her feet. Both stooped to take the baby. Elizabeth resigned him to Nathan, instinctively realizing that Jack was a good advocate in her favour if Nathan still retained fragments of his grievances. She let the old man retain him on his lap while she busied 387
herself about him unpinning his shawls.

It was home-like and companionable to have a woman and baby in the house, and Nathan Hornby had been lonesome a long time. He clucked to the baby and began to trot him up and down on his knee. With a relieved sigh Elizabeth dropped into a chair and watched them.

Jack, unaccustomed to whiskers, put his hand out to investigate. Nathan waggled his chin to shake its pendant brush, and Jack started nervously. Nathan looked across at Elizabeth and laughed. That little laugh did a world of good in aiding Elizabeth's plans. It was not possible for Nathan to catch her eye in good-natured raillery and remain cool of manner; that laugh and the glance that went with it did much to wash away his hurt. In his secret soul Nathan had craved Elizabeth's love and Elizabeth's baby. She had been like a daughter in the house. He had missed her almost as much as his wife had done, but he had resented her long absence. He had come to the house determined not to forget his wrongs, and here he was, in less than fifteen minutes, smiling at her over the head of the baby in friendly amusement. He was puzzled now at the readiness with which he had given in, but Nathan found his love stronger than his grievances.

"Take off your things, Lizzie; th' house's yours if you—if you really want it to be."

Elizabeth took off her wraps and prepared to begin work on the disorderly kitchen. Aunt Susan's limp apron hung on the nail from which the bonnet had fallen, and she put it on, looking about 388
her, undecided where it was best to commence.

"I've come to help—where shall I begin?" she said.

"If I could tell you what t' do I could 'a' done it myself," Nathan said ruefully.

Elizabeth thought of the orderly wife who was gone and a sob arose in her throat.

"Oh, Uncle Nate! You don't know how I miss her sometimes."

And Nathan Hornby replied sadly:

"I kind a think maybe I do."

The night was cloudy and the long diagonal drifts made it hard to drive after dark. The chores had kept Noland later than he had thought and it was dusk when he arrived at Nathan's for Elizabeth.

Hugh Noland had been spending the afternoon with John Hunter about the barn, measuring him and talking of farm prospects. Here was the place for him to settle down, if he could arrange for a partnership. He was so much convinced of this that he was endeavouring to make the alliances of friendship before he led up to the more serious one. It had baffled him to have Elizabeth answer in monosyllables both going to Mr. Hornby's and again during their return; he

wanted to talk. Her home was the first farmhouse he had ever entered that he felt could be home to him; its evidences of culture and refinement had made as lasting an impression upon Hugh Noland as that same home had done upon Elizabeth when John Hunter had taken her to see his mother in it. It was an oasis in the rural desert. He meant to exert every effort to establish himself in it. When Elizabeth did not respond to his attempts at conversation, he fell back upon the analysis of herself and her husband which had been going on in his mind all day. They were evidently not people who felt above their neighbours on account of their superior education, for she had gone to spend a whole afternoon with that plain old farmer and she had shown the liveliest interest, even friendship, for the Swede on the other side of the farm. He liked them the better for that. If a man or woman lived in a community he or she should be a part of that community. Hugh Noland never doubted that the friendly interest he had witnessed was the regularly established course of action and that it was mutual in the household. Coming into the household at this transition point, he was to make many such mistakes in his estimates.

John Hunter was at the side gate to assist his wife and baby out of the sled. He left Elizabeth to carry Jack to the house and went to the barn to help Noland put the team away. This man, who took milking as a lark, and all farm work as a thing to be desired, and yet was a gentleman, was to John Hunter, who scorned these things as beneath himself, an anomaly. It had never occurred to John that labour of that sort could have dignity, nor that a man could choose it as a livelihood unless driven to it. It had never occurred to him that if driven to it one should enter into it as a real participant. To him it was a thing to endure for a time and never refer to after it could be put behind him. The beauty of the dawn, the pleasant odours of new-mown hay, the freshness of the crisp air, the association with the living creatures about him, the joys of a clean life, all escaped him. Hugh Noland had enumerated these things, and many more, while they had worked together that afternoon, and John Hunter accepted the enumeration, not because it was fundamentally true, but because it was the estimate of a cultured and well-educated man.

John Hunter had been vexed at Elizabeth for the sangfroid with which she had walked away from established custom in ordering the team prepared for her to be taken to Nathan's, but with Noland present he had accepted it without remark. Here was a man before whom John would always, but instinctively rather than premeditatively, endeavour to show his best side.

Hugh Noland went to the house with John, talking farm work and prices of produce as if they were matters of pleasant as well as necessary importance, and he set John to talking in his best vein and without superciliousness; he had the faculty of bringing out the best in the people he met. He brought some of his books—he had stopped at the Chamberlain homestead for his trunk on their return that evening—and added them to those already on the Hunter shelves. While arranging them, he sat on the floor before the bookcase and glancing over the titles of those belonging to the family, opened an occasional one and read aloud a verse or a paragraph or two. He read with zest and enthusiasm. He was fresh from the world of lectures and theatres, and the social life of the city, and became a rejuvenating leaven for this entire household.

Luther was on Elizabeth's mind when she awakened the next morning, and as soon as the breakfast work was finished and she had time to get the house in order, she decided to move from her new standpoint and go to see him. To this end she asked Mrs. Hunter to keep Jack while she was gone, and to the older woman's objections that she should let the men hitch up the sled and drive her over she answered firmly:

"I don't want a word said about it. I will go whenever I please without arguing it with anybody."

In her secret soul she was glad to get past the barn without John seeing her. She would not have permitted him to stop her, or delay her visit, but a discussion with her husband was apt to hold surprises and she to become confused and angry, and worsted in the *manner* of her insistence. To get away without having to explain put her in good spirits.

The sun shone brightly and the air, though snappy and cold, was brisk and fresh. It was the first free walk of a mile Elizabeth had ever taken since her marriage. Elizabeth was herself again. She skirted around the long drifts as she crossed the field humming a snatch of tune with all her blood atingle with the delight of being alone in the vast silent fields. The mere passing of time since Aunt Susan's death had gradually worked a change in her condition, which Luther's presence and the stimulating quality of his words, John's absence, the intoxication of the wild and unfettered storm, the visit to Nathan Hornby's, and the invigorating personality of Hugh Noland had combined to rejuvenate in the crushed and beaten girl. Life held meanings to which she had long been blind. Elizabeth set about the reorganizing of her life with no bitterness toward John, only glad to have found herself, with duty to herself as well as others still possible.

Sadie Hansen met Elizabeth at the door with such evident uneasiness that Elizabeth was moved to ask:

"Luther's all right, Sadie?"

"Yes-s-s!" Sadie replied slowly, and with such reluctance that Elizabeth was puzzled.

Sadie took her to the bedroom and shut the door behind her as tight as if she hoped to shut out some evil spirit in the action. Her manner filled Elizabeth with curiosity, but she crossed to Luther and held out her hand.

"Before you 'uns begin," Sadie said with the air of burning her bridges behind her, and before any one had had a chance to speak, "I want t' tell you something. I could 'a' told it in th' kitchen," she stammered, "but I made up my mind last night that I'd have it out with both of you. I've done you th' meanest trick, Lizzie. Luther said you was goin' t' Hornby's yesterday. Did

you go?”

Elizabeth, standing at the head of Luther’s bed, nodded in her surprise, feeling that her visit with Nathan was not a subject to which she could lend words. 393

“Now look here, Lizzie, if what I said t’ th’ Hornbys has made any difference, I’ll go t’ him an’ take it back right before your face.”

Elizabeth’s eyes opened in astonishment.

“Uncle Nate did not mention it to me,” Elizabeth replied.

“Well, I’ve made up my mind I want t’ tell it, an’ have it off my mind.”

Sadie considered a moment and then plunged into her tale hurriedly, for fear that her courage would cease to support her.

“Well, when I was to your house last summer, an’ you told me about th’ effect it had on a baby t’ have a mother that never got mad, I come home an’ tried t’ do everything I thought you meant an’—seems t’ me I never was s’ mean in my life. Mean feelin’ I mean. I got along pretty well at first—I guess it was somethin’ new—? but th’ nearer I got t’ th’ time, th’ worse I got. I scolded Luther Hansen till I know he wished he’d never been born. Th’ worst of it was that I’d told ’im how—what a difference it made, and he was that anxious——?”

Luther raised his hand to protest, but Sadie waved him aside and continued:

“Oh, you needn’t defend me, Luther!” she exclaimed. “I’ve been meaner ’n you know of.” Turning to Elizabeth again, “I used t’ look over t’ your house an’ feel—an’ feel ’s if I could only see you an’ talk a while, I’d git over wantin’ t’ be s’ mean, but you wouldn’t never come t’ see us 394
—an’—an’ I didn’t feel’s if—I didn’t feel free t’ go any more, ’cause ma said you didn’t want t’ be sociable with our kind of folks.”

Sadie paused a moment to crease the hem of her apron and get the twitching out of the corners of her distressed mouth.

“Well, at last, when you didn’t come, an’ I couldn’t git no help from no one, I just said every mean thing I could. I told Hornby a week ’fore his wife died that you said you didn’t want t’ change visits with us country jakes, ’cause you wanted your boy t’ be different from th’ likes of us. Ma’d heard that somewhere, but I told it t’ ’im ’s if you’d said it t’ me. Sue Hornby put ’er hand on my arm an’ said, so kind like, ‘Sadie, ain’t you ’fraid t’ talk that way an’ you in that fix?’ An’ I just cried an’ cried, an’ couldn’t even tell ’er I’d tried t’ do different.”

Luther Hansen had been trying to interrupt the flow of his wife’s confession, and broke in at this point by saying:

“Sadie’s nervous an’ upset over——”

“No, I ain’t,” Sadie replied hastily. “I’ve been as mean as mud, an’ here she’s took care of you, an’ I’ve gone an’ got Hornby mad at ’er. He believed what I told, if ’is wife didn’t. They say, Lizzie, that ’e lives there all by ’iself an’——” Sadie choked, and waited for Elizabeth to speak.

“I guess you’ve worried about nothing,” Elizabeth said brightly. “I’ve been to see him, and we’re good friends—the best kind in fact, and no one could ever make us anything else hereafter.” She looked down at Luther and smiled. 395

“Will it make any difference with my baby?” Sadie asked anxiously, her mind working like a treadmill in its own little round.

“No, Sadie—that is, I guess not. I’ve been thinking, as I listened to you, that the way you tried would have to count—it’s bigger than anything else you’ve done.”

Sadie Hansen dropped into a chair sobbing hysterically.

Elizabeth’s hand went to the girl’s shoulder comfortingly.

“God does not ask that we succeed, Sadie; he asks that we try.”

Elizabeth was back in her own kitchen in time to get dinner. John had seen her as she came home, but made no remark.

At the end of three weeks there was a consultation between Hugh Noland and John regarding a possible partnership. Not only did Noland like John Hunter, but he was delighted with the atmosphere with which he found him surrounded.

“This is a home,” had been Hugh’s secret analysis of the household. In fact the home was the main feature of the Hunter farm, the main reason for wishing to stay.

To John the offer of partnership was a blessing from heaven itself. The matter of interest was pressing on him far more than he had acknowledged to Elizabeth. It galled him to discuss things with her since she had ceased to ask about them or even to show any concern. He did not realize that she had been compelled to consider the matter hopeless. 396

It was agreed that Hugh should lift the indebtedness and have one half interest in the concern, land and stock. There would be about five hundred dollars left over after all the debts were paid, and John gleefully decided to buy some more calves with the residue.

“But we shall need every cent of that for running expenses this summer,” Noland objected.

“Oh, well, if we do, we can always get money on sixty or ninety day loans,” John replied easily.

“I’d rather not go into debt, with my health,” the new partner said decidedly.

He happened to look across at Elizabeth and caught the alert sign of approval in her face. He had heard Silas and some others discuss the Hunter mortgages, but here was a still more significant evidence. Elizabeth had not signalled him, but the look told the story; in fact, it told more than the girl had intended.

“I should consider it a necessary condition of any business I went into,” he added steadily. “I am an uncertain quantity, as I have told you, with this heart, and I could not be worried with debts.”

Elizabeth did not look at him this time, but he saw the look of satisfaction and heard her indrawn breath. And now the really lovable side of Hugh Noland began to show out. Feeling now that he was a real member of the family, he began to give himself to its pleasing features. 397
The evening’s reading became a thing to which the whole group looked forward. The flow of companionship exceeded anything any member of the family had ever anticipated. Jake arrived in time for the spring work, as he had agreed, and was astonished by every feature of the family life which he saw about him. Elizabeth was cheerful, even happy, while John Hunter was another man. Jake figured out the changes about him wistfully, craving a part in the good-fellowship. Here was contentment such as Jake had never witnessed. Not a trace of the old tragic conditions seemed to remain. Jake had missed the key to the situation by his absence at the time of the blizzard, but he was keenly aware that some change had been wrought. He studied Hugh Noland and was even more enthusiastic about his personality and powers than the family. All called the new man by his given name, a sure sign of their affection.

Elizabeth had worked a radical change in her life. Jake watched her come and go without remark from her husband, give her orders to Hugh to hitch up for her if she chose to drive, or if she walked, going without permission, and was almost as pleased as she. He saw that she had learned to keep her own counsel and not to speak of her plans till the time for action had arrived. He felt a something new in her.

Elizabeth had, in fact, learned that while openness was a point of character, nevertheless, if she dealt openly with her husband it led to quarrelsome discussions. She saw that John did not know 398
why he opposed her, that it was instinctive. As she studied him, however, she found how widely separated they were in spirit. The calm which Jake saw, was all there, but there were other things fully as vital which had not been there before. The self-questioning of those months previous to Aunt Susan’s death had been productive of results. While a certain openness of attitude had disappeared, there was the strength which has all the difference between deceit and reserve in Elizabeth Hunter’s face.

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CHAPTER XVIII

THE CHILD OF HER BODY

In the spring Elizabeth’s affairs, which had promised to straighten out, were complicated from a new quarter. She was now to test her strength against the greatest of all problems for women and to find out if she could put her precepts into practice. The probability of a second child had become a certainty; the necessity of adjusting her good-will to accidental child-bearing was upon her. Often and often her words to Sadie—“I always wanted my baby”—rose up to accuse her. Only of late had suspicion become a certainty. Elizabeth did not greet that certainty with joy. Life was hard; she had more work to do already than she was able to perform; try as she would she could not get her mental consent. Why must she have this undesired child? When the thought first wormed its way into her head, Elizabeth passed from disappointment to self-accusation. By every law of God and man a mother should want her child; if she did not, then she stood accused at Nature’s bar.

“For its sake I’ve got to want it; I’ll make myself,” she decided. But she did not want it, and found to her growing dismay that she could not make herself satisfied about it. Instead of 400
becoming reconciled, the question enlarged and grew and gained in point and force. The girl decided that she would be glad in spite of every opposing thing, but her resolution was formed with tears in her heart, if not in her eyes, and the weary ache in her back never ceased. “It must not be so. My child must be welcome!” Elizabeth told herself each morning, but she was too tired; it was not welcome, and all her efforts failed to make it so.

John was vexed when he found her in tears.

“The idea!” he exclaimed. “Now if we were too poor to feed and clothe it there’d be some excuse, but——” He made his pause as expressive as he could.

“It isn’t that. I—I’m so tired and—I ought to be glad—and—and I’m not,” she began.

“Well, I suppose with mother gone”—Mrs. Hunter had returned to her old home on a visit—“you *have* got a good deal to look after, but I’ve got to get to the field now. You’re always raking something up that looks wrong to you. If you’d stick to your work and not run around looking for

trouble you'd be able to want it, maybe."

The force of her husband's suggestion struck the girl. Perhaps it was true that she had missed the very highest for herself in loving ease and comfort enough to seek them. To put discontent away from her and to keep her thoughts occupied she began the spring housecleaning. There was so much regular cooking and milk work that only one room could be attacked at a time, but she kept busy, and the plan worked admirably during the day. She was not sleeping well, 401
however, and found that nights have a power all their own. When the lights went out, thought held the girl in its relentless grip. It was of no use to lengthen her working hours in the hope that sleep would come more promptly, for the more exhausted Elizabeth became the less able was she to sleep, and thought stared at her out of the darkness with eyes like living coals.

Wherever Elizabeth turned this monster confronted her, this monster whose tail was a question mark, whose body obscured everything on the horizon of the immediate future except its own repulsive presence, and threw her back upon the suffering present and the much to be deplored past. Was it right to permit a child to come when joy had gone out of relations between its parents? This question grew and ripened and spread, and whenever she summoned up enough will-power to weed it out for an hour it would spring up anew, refreshed and more tenacious than ever.

"Whether it's right or not for John and me to have a child after we've quit loving each other, if I can only be glad it's coming, or even be willing to have it, I won't mind, now," she told herself. But she was not glad, and she was not even willing. She dragged herself about, keeping busy day after day as her husband had advised; it was her only refuge, and one which could not avail very long, for already she was worn out. On the last day of the cleaning, Hugh Noland came to 402
the door of her room and speaking from the outside said:

"I came in to see if I couldn't help you a little in getting ready for those shellers, Mrs. Hunter." Hugh had noticed her weary look of late, and, as all the men about the house did, tried to help whenever there was time to be spared from the fields or when extra work was required of her.

"Shellers?"

Elizabeth backed out of the closet she was cleaning, and came around to the door.

"Shellers? Are we going to have shellers?"

"To-morrow," he said in surprise.

In spite of her exclamation of astonishment Elizabeth noted a familiar look on Hugh Noland's face which had something in it that always caught her attention. Always when an unexpected thing came upon Hugh, Elizabeth had a sense of having had past relations with him.

"You don't tell me you didn't know?"

"I surely didn't. When did John go to see the men about it? Why, I haven't even bread baked!" she exclaimed.

"That's funny! Well—I suppose he forgot to tell you. The men passed here before dinner and he went out to the road and engaged them. We've got a little corn left over, and prices seem to be up this week."

"Well, it's only one of many things," she said, trying to smile. 403

Her eyes wandered over the disordered bedroom as she considered. Clothing, boots, shoes, and other articles of apparel lay scattered over the bed. Her orderly soul could not leave them without finishing.

"I'll tell you what you do—I'll straighten up here. You go over to Uncle Nate's and get me some yeast. I'll have to bake. I made him some yeast the last time I made for myself, and he'll have some left. It's been too damp and cloudy to make any of late. Then I'll see what you can do," she said wearily. "I surely will need help if I've got to have a dozen extra men without notice. I suppose John forgot. He's usually thoughtful about the cooking for strange men."

Something in the hurt, weary look of her went to Hugh Noland's heart.

"I'll run over to Hornby's and back in half an hour unless he's at the far side of the field. Anyhow, I'll get back the very first minute I can. I have to start to Mitchell County to-morrow, early in the morning, so I won't have any time to do anything except to-night. I can kill the chickens for you, and bring things up out of the cellar. What on earth made anybody put a cave as far from the kitchen door as that for is more than I can see," he said, taking vengeance on the first unpleasant feature of her circumstances that presented itself.

Hugh did not at all understand why she was sick and unequal to the demands made upon her strength, but he did see that she was so, and that her tired young face wore a discouraged expression. 404

"I'll take Jack with me; that'll help some," he said as an afterthought.

"If you would——" The relief in her voice told the strain it was upon her to work and watch the toddling child. "I'll tell you—hurry back and tack this carpet down for me. I'll have the room and closet straightened up so that you can do it by then."

She wiped Jack's dirty face with the end of a towel she thrust into the water pitcher on the washstand and sent him off with a kiss to the welcome ride. As she worked after they were gone, she ran over in her mind the supplies on hand for the feeding of fifteen men on such short notice. Threshing and corn-shelling meant hard work to the men who followed the business, but

it meant feasting and festivity as well, and it was with the prospect of much cooking on the morrow that Elizabeth furrowed her forehead, and hurried with the replacing of the contents of the closet. There was a sponge to be set to-night and bread to bake to-morrow; there was a cake to be baked, beans picked over and set to soak, and dried fruit to stew; also, and what was more annoying, she had let the churning run over for twenty-four hours in order to finish her cleaning.

"If I can't get around to that churning, I'll just let it go if it does sour," she decided at last.

When Hugh came back she set him to work at the carpet and went to the kitchen to look after things there. Nathan had offered to keep Jack when he heard of the unexpected work his mother was going to have thrust upon her, and Hugh, remembering Elizabeth's relieved expression when he had offered to bring the child, was only too glad to leave him in such good hands. 405

"How long is that child going to stay at Hornby's?" John demanded the next morning. He set the heavy cream jar on the table and faced Elizabeth, who was kneading the bread on the big bread-board which rested on the top of the flour barrel.

"I don't know—till Uncle Nate gets time to bring him home to-day, I suppose."

Elizabeth did not look up.

"Well, I don't want this thing to happen again. A child that age has no business away from home. What was your idea, anyhow?"

"Ask Hugh. I didn't have anything to do with it. I didn't even know it till he got back. He knew you had engaged the shellers without giving me any notice, and he knew I had too much for any woman to do. Uncle Nate knew it too. Go on, and don't bother me this morning; I'm so tired I can't talk about it, anyhow."

John Hunter was instantly apologetic.

"Oh, well, if Hugh did it I suppose he meant well. He got off all right. I look for some results with that Mitchell County land if he goes into it right. I'll send the cattle down as soon as he has time to get the fences in line and a man to look after them. I brought this cream up; it won't keep any longer."

John lifted the lid of the cream jar and sniffed with disapproval. "I'll just put it into the churn for you." 406

"Oh, dear! what did you bring it up for to-day? I can't churn with all I've got to do. Take it back."

"It won't keep!"

"Well—I can't churn, and I won't, so there! I've got all I can do to-day. I should not have let it go, but the cleaning dragged so; besides, I didn't know I was going to have all these men to-day and I thought I could get it done. Take it back. I can't have the churn around in the way to-day. I've never let a churning go to waste in my life, but if this gets too sour it won't cost any more than to have hired a girl to help with the work this week. Go on, and take it to the cellar and let me alone."

Elizabeth turned her back to show him that the argument was over, and did not see that he went out without it, leaving it on the back of the one small kitchen table she had. The pies she had just finished baking were ready to be taken from the oven, and when she turned to put them on the table she was confronted by the cream jar. The table was not large and she must have room for the food to be cooked that day, so Elizabeth lifted the heavy jar from the table and, after the pies were out, brought the churn. She could not carry it to the cellar again and there was no other way.

The sour cream refused to yield, and the girl churned on and on while she watched the dinner cook. The dinner boiled and bubbled, and the stove was working as actively in the kitchen as the corn-sheller was doing in the barnyard, when Nathan set Jack in the doorway and followed him in. Nathan sniffed appreciatively. 407

"Smells pretty good in here," he said, and then surveying the room in surprise added, "What on earth be you churnin' for? Ain't you got enough t' do, child?"

Elizabeth stooped to gather Jack into her arms and made no reply.

"It's as hot as th' devil in here," Nathan said, taking his coat off. "Here let me have a turn at that churn. You ought t' be in bed. That's where Sue'd put you if she was here."

He took the dasher into his own hand and began a brave onslaught on the over-sour cream. The butter gave signs of coming, but would not gather. He churned, and the sweat of his brow had to be wiped frequently to keep it from where he would literally have it to eat; it ran down inside his prickly blue flannel shirt, it stood out on his hair, hands and arms like dew on the morning grass, and the old man looked out to the wheezing corn-sheller and envied the men working in the cool breeze where life and courage could be sustained while one laboured.

"I wouldn't be a woman for fifty dollars a day," he announced with grim conviction. "It'd make a devil out of anybody t' work in this hell-hole. No wonder you're s' peeked, child."

John came back to the house almost immediately after leaving it to go to work in the afternoon.

"You'll have to bake more pies, Elizabeth. The men have been put back by a breakdown. They 408

won't be able to get through before five or half-past," he said, coming into the kitchen to investigate the larder.

"They can't?" Elizabeth exclaimed, longing for the rest she had planned to get after the dinner work was finished.

"No. It's too bad, but it can't be helped. Now you get the oven going and I'll come in and help you about beating the eggs. You'll have to make custard pie, I guess, for there ain't enough fruit to make any more. Hurry, and I'll be in in a few minutes."

"I'm not going to make any more pies to-day," Elizabeth replied.

"You'll have to. Men like pies better than anything you could put on the table. How are you off for meat? Have you chicken enough left or shall I bring up a ham?"

Elizabeth faced this second meal with a dread she could not have expressed; she was so tired that she could scarcely stand; her back ached, and there was a strange pain pulling at her vitals.

"I'll attend to the supper. Go right on out of here. I am not going to bake any more pies. You crowded that churning on me this morning and you'd make my work double what it ought to be if I let you help. Go on!"

John brushed past her and lifted the bread-box.

The fierce heat of the cook stove, the pain in her back, the certain knowledge of suggestions to come, broke down the poise the girl was trying to maintain.

"I don't want any remarks about that bread-box! I've got sense enough to get supper. Go on out to your own work and let me attend to mine." 409

John Hunter stepped back in astonishment. He had been sympathetic, and had really wanted to be helpful. He was insulted and struck an attitude intended to convey the fact, but his wife closed the oven door with a bang and left the room without looking at him.

John punished his wife that night by letting her wash the supper dishes alone.

The next morning John continued to be aloof of manner and went to his work without attempting to empty the skimmed milk as usual, or to strain the new milk which stood at the top of the long cellar stairs. Elizabeth skimmed and strained and put the shelves in order. Her head ached, and her back never ceased hurting. When the last crock had been carried from the cave, the half-sick girl dragged herself to the bedroom and threw herself down on the unmade bed.

"I don't care—I won't do another stroke till I feel better, if it's never done. It wasn't nice for me to scold yesterday when he really wanted to help, but he makes so much extra work that I *can't* get it all done. It don't hurt him any more to be scolded than it does me to be kept on my feet after everything in my body is pulling out. He won't run off again and leave me to carry that heavy milk. I don't know why I didn't just leave it."

Elizabeth did not realize that she had done more than waste useful strength on useless tasks. She had yet to find out that it would have been cheaper to have left the entire contents of the cellar to sour or mould than to have worked on after she could do no more in comfort. It took Doctor Morgan to point out to her that farmers and their wives place undue value on a dollar's worth of milk, and that they support those of his profession at a far greater price than their butter would cost if they fed the milk to the pigs; also that they fill the asylums with victims and give younger women the chance to spend what they have worked to save after they are transplanted to other regions. They had been obliged to send for the doctor at noon. 410

The name of peritonitis did not impress the young wife with any importance when the old doctor warned her to lie still and rest. The fierce pain was eased by getting off her feet and she was so glad to rest that she took his advice, but she had had no illness and little experience with chronic ailments. He hoped to pull her through without the threatened disaster, but warned her solemnly.

"I'm glad we have you where you can't carry anything more out of that confounded hole in the ground," he said savagely. "You'd never quit till you were down, anyhow. Now don't you lift that child, no matter whether he cries or not."

He took John aside and talked to him seriously about his wife, and demanded that there be a hired girl procured. John listened as seriously and went to the kitchen and got the supper and prepared for breakfast. He worked diligently and took Elizabeth a dainty bite to eat, but when the question of a girl came up, he had his own say about that. 411

"I'll do the work in this house till you can get around yourself, but I never intend to look for a girl in this country again. You'll be stronger after a bit and then you can look for one."

He put Jack's nightgown over his little head and buttoned it in the back while he talked.

"This 'll pass over, and You'll be better in a week's time. I don't care if you have two girls, so I don't have to hunt them. Here, Jack, let me slip that shoe off."

"I can't seem to get well, though, with the drag of the housework on my mind," the girl said drearily.

Elizabeth wanted a woman in the kitchen. She lay without speaking for a moment, thinking that as usual she was unable to get the thing that her own judgment demanded. John would wash his dishes clean and keep the cooking and sweeping done as well as she, but she knew that the first day she would be out of bed she would be dragged to the kitchen to consult and oversee

continually.

“Doctor Morgan said I might not be able to get around much all summer,” she ventured, exaggerating the words of the old doctor somewhat in her determination to get help at all costs that would leave her free to get well.

“At least you can wait and see,” John replied indifferently, already concerned with his own problems. He pushed Jack from his lap and sat lost in thought.

Elizabeth made it a rule never to argue unless there was hope of righting things. To say one word more was to lose her temper and that she tried not to do. The girl was really very ill; her head ached, and her body was sore and tender. She had not had a whole night’s sleep for weeks 412
and every nerve in her body cried out for rest; she wanted the light put out, she wanted to get quiet and to forget the house, and to be freed from the confusion; she was so nervous that she started at every noise. The night was cool and Jack, who shivered in his thin gown, crawled into his father’s lap. John wanted to think at that moment, and to get rid of him put him firmly down on the foot of the bed, moving over to give him room at his side as he did so.

“Oh, don’t shake the bed!” Elizabeth exclaimed, with such concentrated irritation that John set the child on the floor hastily.

“I only thought you could watch him a minute. I can’t keep him on my lap all the time,” John replied.

“Well, put him in the bed then, or tie him up or do something. I don’t want to watch him, and his climbing around on the bed sets me crazy!” she exclaimed, pushing the child away from her pillow.

“We don’t tie children up in the Hunter family,” John replied, as usual falling upon the unimportant phase of the discussion and, instead of putting the child in bed, carried him off to the sitting room, where he fell into another brown study and let the baby slip from his lap again.

Jack, as soon as released, ran back to the bedroom and threw himself up against the side of the bed, stretching his arms up to be taken.

“Don’t, dear; go to papa,” Elizabeth said, trying to reach him. 413

Jack sidled away toward the foot of the bed, where he regarded his mother with stolid eyes, and beat a tattoo on the bed-rail with his hard little head.

“Jack! Don’t do that!” she commanded sharply.

It was torture for her to have the bed jarred.

Jack, baby fashion, raised his head and gave the bed-rail another whack.

Elizabeth sat up suddenly and gave the child such a resounding slap that he sat down, shaking the whole house with the impact, his screams quite in keeping with the occasion. John carried the crying child out of the room, shutting the door with such a bang that the house and bed shook anew, and the girl had to bite her lip to keep from screaming.

It was the first time Elizabeth had ever struck her child in anger. Usually gentle and patient with his baby wilfulness, her heart recoiled at the deed. She knew that the possibilities of that action had been growing upon her of late. Nothing could excuse it to the accusing judge of Elizabeth’s own soul. It was as if she were fenced around with a thousand devils; turn where she would there was no help and but little hope. She had come to understand herself enough to know that with sufficient provocation she would almost certainly do it again. The girl thought of her father. The deed was so like things that she had seen him do that she almost tore her hair as she prayed to be spared such a soul-destroying fate.

It was Jack’s future estimates of her that caused her so much distress. The things emphasized by the mother in a home, she knew, were the things emphasized in the lives of her children. She 414
had only to look at Jack’s father to see the evidences of that truth. Mrs. Hunter’s cleanliness and order, her tendency to over-emphasize details, were her son’s strongest watchwords. It was absolutely imperative that she do the right thing by Jack. As she pondered she decided that she would rise up and make one more effort for the child. Then, like a creeping serpent, the thought of her attitude toward the child of her body suddenly presented its forked tongue and demanded that its future be reckoned with. From what principle was she dealing with it? Elizabeth knelt before the shrine of that child, not in joy and adoration, but with a fear which had almost become a hatred.

Elizabeth did not realize that it was the work and worry which she had gone through in these last weeks which made her irritable. She did not recognize the difference between nerves and temper, but she had come to understand that the unborn child was draining her strength. The prayer in her heart as she lay there thinking it out was for help to adjust her life to the conditions which she must meet, for strength to control herself, and for the power to so order her mental attitude toward this new child that she might be able to love it as it certainly deserved to be loved. But even as she prayed a horrible thought took possession of her:

“If only it would die and be prematurely released, as Doctor Morgan had said there was danger of it doing!”

It was then that Elizabeth Hunter realized the possibilities in herself. That was murder! If John 415
complicated her work throughout eternity it would not warrant such an attitude. But this second child! It was the absorbing topic of her thoughts as she vainly tried to rest. She was so worn out that she could face no more work than she already had to do, and ever as she thought this

serpent of temptation thrust its head out at her and said: “If the child would only die!”

Elizabeth had only to get out of bed and go to work to rid herself of the hateful burden in the present state of her health, but under no circumstances would she have done it. She would have parted with her right hand before she would have helped to destroy a life she had permitted to spring into being, and yet—— The thought occurred, and recurred, in spite of every effort, “If only——” And she knew that if it happened without her assistance she would be glad.

Elizabeth’s distress increased, and when John brought her dinner on a tray covered with a fresh napkin and beside the plate a violet he and Jack had found in the pasture she brightened with pleasure at the dainty arrangement, but did not touch the food.

“Now be good to the baby; he’s been asking for you all morning,” he said, kissing Elizabeth with an effort at kindliness and understanding.

Elizabeth’s head was aching wildly, and she was so nervous that she could scarcely endure being spoken to at all.

“Then don’t leave him here, John, for I can’t bear to have him fussing around,” she said, trying 416
to be appreciative.

“Oh, well, if you don’t want him at all, I’ll take him out again,” he said crossly, setting the tray on a chair beside the bed.

He was able, however, to see that the girl was not altogether herself, and shut the door behind him carefully. The door shut so softly that the latch did not catch. When Jack finished his dinner he came running to his mother’s room at once. The door gave way under his hand and he stood looking into the room curiously. After a glance around, he advanced confidently toward the bed with a mischievous twinkle in his eyes.

Elizabeth set her teeth hard. She was unable to reach out and lift him to a chair where he would not jar the bed, so it was her intention to be patient.

Jack’s eyes fell upon the tray as he passed it, and he wheeled around and took stock of the contents of this new form of table. Frantic with irritability and knowing that she would be at fault in the manner of correcting the child, his mother let him eat out of the plate she had left untouched, rather than have a scene with him. Presently, however, Jack laid down the spoon with which he had been eating and attacked a dish of berries with his hands, letting the drops from the ends of his fingers trickle down the front of his clean gingham dress. Elizabeth happened to look up and saw what he was doing. There was no telling when she could get another washing done and her impulse was to spring at him and snatch him from harm’s way, 417
but she was trying to be more gentle and, drawing in a deep breath, she spoke as quietly as she could command herself to do.

“Don’t do that, Jack,” she said, reaching out her hand to take him by the arm.

Jack clutched the dish in sudden haste and raised it to his mouth, letting a stream of the purple juice dribble from it to his own bulging front before his mother could get her hand on him. Then, fearing a repetition of the blow of the night before, the baby threw himself on the floor, screaming loudly.

John came excitedly from the kitchen.

“What have you done to him now?” he asked, and without waiting to hear her reply went out, flinging the door back with a crash.

It was nearly dark when Doctor Morgan came, but although he was anxious to get back to his office he saw at once that he must stay with the suffering girl.

In the morning he called John out to the buggy and had a little talk with him.

“I feel, Hunter, as if I’d been a little to blame for this thing,” he said as he picked up his lines to start for home. “I thought you’d be able to see that noise and worry were bad for her. I ought to have impressed the gravity of her condition on you and warned you that she must not be worried by that baby. You can see every muscle in her set hard when the bed is jarred. That child’s got to be kept out of there. Those things hurt a woman in that condition like a knife.” 418

“She’s been awfully cross and cried about everything this week, but she hasn’t complained much—that is, of anything but a little backache,” John replied, fingering the whipstock of the doctor’s buggy and not able to connect the present serious illness with any real reason.

“Little backache!” Doctor Morgan exclaimed with exasperation. “I never seem to be able to get you men to understand that noise hurts a woman sometimes worse than if you’d hit her with a ball-bat. Hurts, mind! It ain’t imagination; it hurts, and will send a fever up in no time. Have I made it clear to you?” he asked doubtfully.

“I guess you have,” John said, relinquishing the whipstock. “She’s been awfully fretful, but I never thought of her being sick enough for this.”

“Well,” the old doctor said emphatically. “You’ve lost the child, and You’ll lose your wife if you don’t look out. You get a girl in that kitchen, and see to it that she tends things without Mrs. Hunter having to look after her. She won’t do another day’s work for a good long time—and mind, I say, You’ll lose her yet if you don’t keep that child off her till she has a chance to get well.”

As Doctor Morgan drove away he said meditatively:

“Think I got him that time. Blamed fool!”

CHAPTER XIX

“HER WAGES, FOOD AND CLOTHING SHE MUST ACCEPT”

Luther Hansen was at the door when John returned, and they entered the sitting room together. Jack was leaning against the bedroom door, and John, who remembered Doctor Morgan’s parting advice, went to close it. The baby ran to his mother, escaping the outstretched hands of the father, who was after him, but the child had miscalculated the opposition this time and was taken firmly into John’s arms and lifted free from the bed.

“Tell Luther to come to me,” Elizabeth whispered.

“Doctor Morgan said——” John began.

“Tell Luther to come to me,” Elizabeth repeated, putting every particle of strength she had into her voice so that by having Luther hear her John would be obliged to comply.

Luther came without having to be told.

“Luther, could you get Hepsie back for me, if you told her Mother Hunter was gone and would not come back?” she asked, falling back into a whisper from sheer weakness.

Luther bent to catch her words. Elizabeth’s illness showed plainly in her pinched face this morning; he would have done anything she asked of him.

“Of course,” he answered cheerfully.

Luther really did not know whether Hepsie could be had, but he meant to have her if she was not already at work somewhere else. He listened to the directions and promised without equivocation that Hepsie would come. He understood that for some reason the thing Elizabeth asked of him she could ask of him alone, but was careful to couch his replies so that that fact was not indicated even to her.

When it was arranged, Elizabeth closed her weary eyes as a sign that she wished to be alone, and the men retired from the room, leaving her in the first real peace she had known since her illness began. With Hepsie in the house, she could look forward to the days to come with less dismay. She resolved that if she did get the girl back that she would keep her as long as there were hired men to cook for. With the assurance that Hugh would keep John from falling into debt again there would be funds to pay her and there was as much need of a girl in the kitchen as of men in the field.

Hepsie came gladly. She had always liked Elizabeth, and the well-furnished Hunter house, with the equally well-furnished pantry, was desirable.

Elizabeth’s life was in grave danger and when John at last grasped the fact he looked after her needs rigorously. He tiptoed about the house, looking to it personally that no discomfort assailed the wan patient. Jack learned the note of authority in his father’s voice, and incidentally the weight of his hand also, and quiet prevailed. John reflected the mood of the sick room in every step he took. Much of the time Elizabeth was too ill to observe John’s changed attitude, but the second week she began to awake to things about her. She went over the situation again and again. Something had to be done. Things had promised to straighten out since Hugh’s coming, but the very day of his first absence the old coercion was renewed. John would not have brought the cream jar up without asking if Hugh had been there, or if he had done so she could have mentioned the inconvenience of its presence before Hugh and got it carried back to the cellar. The importance of Hugh’s presence loomed up before Elizabeth as she lay considering her situation; Hugh was her only hope for better conditions. She had accepted Hugh as a happy feature of the family life and of the business, but she had not thought of him as a factor in her personal affairs.

There was another feature of the weariness which came from being pushed beyond the amount of work she was momentarily able to do: she became irritable with Jack when tired, and then John interfered. Here again, her only hope lay in Hugh. With Hugh present John was suave, polite, and apt to treat her as a man is supposed to treat his wife. Considering all these things, Elizabeth began to look forward to Hugh’s return eagerly.

As if to favour Elizabeth’s plans, Hugh Noland found Mitchell County a lonely place to stay and as soon as the fencing was finished put a man in charge and returned with all possible speed.

“Oh, John, you brother!” he exclaimed when he met John Hunter at the kitchen door the day he arrived. He held out both his hands. “I haven’t had such a sense of coming *home* since my mother’s death.”

They greeted, and looked at each other long and earnestly, and John Hunter allowed himself to enter into closer relations of friendship and love than he had ever done in the twenty-seven

years of his life.

“I’m glad you’re here,” John said when he had recovered from his surprise over this unusual demonstration of affection. “We’re going to lift Elizabeth out into a chair for the first time today. She’ll be glad you’ve come too.”

“How is she? You didn’t say much about her in your last letter.”

“Wasn’t much to say,” John replied. “She’s better—that’s the main thing. Come on into the sitting-room till I can get her ready and get a quilt in the rocking chair.”

“Got a girl, I see!” Hugh remarked in a whisper as they closed the door behind them.

“Yes, and a good one fortunately. Too much milk and butter. I found that out when I got at it. No more buttermaking in mine. I had the whole thing on my hands for over a week. I turned half those cows out to grass,” John said, bringing forward the chair for the invalid.

“I was afraid the morning I left that she had too much to do with all those shellers on such short notice.”

Hugh stooped to pick up the baby. 423

“How are you, partner?” he cried, swinging the delighted child up to the ceiling. Jack was wild with joy. Hugh stood with legs wide apart and cuddled the baby to him for a squeeze. This was part of the homecoming too. He was still hugging Jack tenderly when John beckoned from the bedroom door.

Hugh drew the rocking chair into the bedroom and then stopped to stare at the wasted figure wrapped in a quilt who had to be supported while he adjusted it.

“John! You didn’t tell me she was like this!”

He took the thin hands in his, both of them, just as he had done John’s a moment before, and was moved almost to tears by the pallid face. Elizabeth’s brown eyes had fallen back into her bony, sharp-lined head, and her nose was thin and drawn.

“Words fail me, Mrs. Hunter,” he said feelingly.

But though words failed to express Hugh Noland’s sympathy his eyes did not, and the girl, who had not had an hour’s sympathetic companionship since he had been gone, caught the fact and was cheered by it.

Hugh Noland was vital and invigorating. Elizabeth listened to his account of the adventures in Mitchell County. He was a good story-teller and his incidents were well selected. She was too weak to sit up a whole hour and was carried tenderly back to her bed, where the family life centred now that she was becoming able to stand the noise and confusion of it.

During the days which followed, Hugh, at John’s suggestion, brought his books and read aloud to them in that little bedroom in the warm spring evenings, and life in the Hunter house took on 424
a brighter complexion than it had ever before assumed.

John, who had been sleeping in Hugh’s room since Elizabeth’s serious illness, returned to his own bed. He looked about him for Jack the first night and asked where he was.

“I sent him up to Hepsie’s room,” Elizabeth said quietly.

“To sleep!”

“Yes.”

“The children in the Hunter family are not put into the servants’ beds,” John Hunter replied. The unexplained statement was offensive to a man accustomed to being consulted.

To punish her John went to sleep without giving her the usual good-night kiss.

“He’d have been cross, anyhow,” was all the thought she gave that part of the circumstance. Could John Hunter have known that the absence of that kiss was a relief, and that he made of his presence sometimes an intolerable nightmare, he might have saved for himself a corner in her tired heart against the days to come. John’s zeal and passion had gone into the pursuit of their courtship days. Now they were married, possession was a fact: Elizabeth was his wife.

Elizabeth understood that John was whimsical and tyrannical, but not intentionally evil, but in spite of the fact that she had John’s character summed up and understood that much that he did 425
was not deliberately intended to do her injury, that little of it was in fact, she felt a growing disinclination for his presence. The unloved, undesired child which she had lost was a warning guidepost pointing its finger away from a continuance of marital relations. No conditions could make it right for her to have another child till love again existed between them. She saw that nothing could excuse or make decent the child of wornout conditions; nothing but affection made marriage worthy, and when that affection had departed from a man and woman, to thrust life upon a child was a crime against that child, a crime against nature and a crime against themselves and society; yet, what could she do? Her health was broken, and she without means of support. After Aunt Susan’s death the girl had seriously considered separation; she still considered it, but not seriously. Though she cried “Fool! fool!” many times, she had given her youth, her health, her strength to John Hunter, and her wages—food and clothing—she must accept.

CHAPTER XX

THE CREAM-JARS OF HER LIFE

While Elizabeth progressed toward health the work on the Hunter farm progressed also. Because of taking the cattle to Mitchell County it was possible to get in a greater acreage of small grain and corn. Patsie had a small colt at her side, as did her mate also, and there was an extra man needed in the field most of the time, but after repeated consultations it was decided that by using care the teams they had would be able to plow the corn, and that they could hire help for the harvesting cheaper than they could buy another pair of horses.

However, in spite of the discussions which were supposed to have settled the matter, John came home from Colebyville one Saturday with a new team.

“What do you think of them?” he asked Hugh, who opened the gate to let him into the barnyard. “I just made up my mind that it wasn’t economy to push the horses we had so hard. I got them at a bargain.”

“You’ve bought them, you say?”

“Yes,” was the brief answer.

“I’d take them back,” Hugh said slowly but decidedly. “Horses and dogs talk with their tails, and I don’t like the way this one acts.”

“I can’t take them back. I got them from a mover. I got them for a song, and we’re going to need them for the binder. I know what we said,” he went on, interrupting Hugh, who was trying to speak, “but there was a bargain in them and we do need them.”

“But we haven’t the money! How did you buy them? You couldn’t pay for them outright.”

Hugh Noland had been feeling his way down the foreleg of the horse nearest him. The animal was nervous and had crowded over against its mate in an endeavour to get away. Both its ears were laid back, and there was a half-threatening air about its movements. As Hugh straightened up to continue the discussion of finances, it jumped aside, quivering with fright.

“I gave a check on the bank,” John replied uneasily. Hugh had never criticised him before.

Hugh was taken up with soothing the nervous animal for a moment.

“You’ll run out of money before the summer’s over,” he said warningly.

“Oh, I’ve had to borrow a little already. With Elizabeth’s illness and all, I saw we weren’t going to get through, so I just took out a loan of five hundred and paid Doc Morgan while I was at it. I meant to have told you. I’ve got some calves coming from over west to-morrow too.” John poured it all out while he was at it, with a relief in having it over.

There was a pause. When Hugh Noland again spoke it was with a distinct note of firmness and almost of authority.

“The plain understanding in our partnership—the one I laid the most stress upon to start with—was that there should be no debts. I’m willing that you should be free to select a team; it isn’t that. Did you borrow this money in the firm’s name?”

“Yes-s-s. I didn’t think you’d care about a little sum like that,” John said slowly. He was very uncomfortable. “I turned my personal note in on the account book for the doctor’s bill. You can see it on the book.”

“I don’t doubt at all but that you did, John. You’re not called into question, old boy, on any other matter than the one of debts, but You’ll never put this firm five cents in debt without coming to an instant understanding. I came to this country to get well. I won’t get well, but I won’t allow myself to get into anything that will run me down quicker with worry. You knew it before you went in with me—and you agreed.”

That was the final word John Hunter felt as he tied the skittish brute he had just purchased in the stall beside the door, and turned to put the hay down from the loft above. The sound of plunging feet and snorts of wild terror when the hay fell into the manger turned his mind to the probable truth of Hugh’s opinion of the lately purchased horses.

“I wonder if the blamed brutes are going to be too maggoty for our use after all,” he thought. “It’d be just my luck. He was fair about it though,” John admitted reluctantly. “Oh, well, after all, he’s worth having around, and I’m going to do a deal better than I would if he hadn’t come along. Elizabeth was right—I did get in too deep.” And with this astonishing admission, John Hunter finished haying the horses and walked slowly to the house, thinking about the new horses, and half prepared to admit that he had made a mistake in buying them outright from a man who was able to get away before they could be proven, but Elizabeth and Hugh were already sitting by the table in the living room and he knew he was wanted. He went to the bedroom to wash his hands—John could not form the habit of washing in the kitchen as other farmers did—and as he washed, meditated, and as he meditated he found himself ready to accept this reproof from Hugh Noland, ready to live up to agreements if Hugh imposed them,

ready to listen to Hugh and love him. Something in Hugh Noland was so fundamentally square that the principle of squareness took on a new meaning to John Hunter.

“Here you are! You’re the one that’s insisted on these readings most, and you’re always late,” Hugh cried as John came from the bedroom, fresh and well groomed as if he had not done barn chores a few minutes before.

The reading was part of John Hunter’s play world. John was not a man of scholarly tastes, but reading, like the use of the hairbrush he had just laid down, was good form: they were both part of the world to which John wished to belong. A book might or might not relate to that world, but it was a book and seemed to do so, and while John Hunter might or might not get much intellectual advancement out of a book, he got advancement out of sitting in Hugh Noland’s presence and opening his heart to the love and respect Hugh commanded from him. John did not close himself off from Hugh’s influence as he did from Elizabeth’s, and the things he refused to take from her he adopted and readily set into action at Hugh’s suggestion.

It was destined to be the last night in which John was to be permitted the comfort of this new feature of home life, however. As they were gathered about the breakfast table a man rode into the lane and called John Hunter to the door without getting off his horse.

“Doc Morgan was goin’ past my house this mornin’ an’ asked me if I’d bring this over t’ you. ’E said it came after you left town, an’ th’ agent didn’t know how t’ git over t’ you ’thout he was comin’ this way this mornin’. Hope it ain’t no bad news.”

He waited to see John tear open the envelope and read the telegram.

“My mother’s sick,” was John’s hurried statement as he turned toward the house.

Hugh drove John Hunter to the station. The sun was hot and he had read till nearly midnight the night before, and, busy season though it was, he thought it best not to start home till toward night. Doctor Morgan had returned home and Hugh, as was his custom, went to the office for a chat. It was one of the chief delights of both to have an hour together.

“Do they get along well together—Hunter and his wife?” Doctor Morgan asked after he had taken Hugh’s health into account.

“You’d think so if you’d heard the directions I received for her care just now,” Hugh answered with a laugh.

“Well, I don’t care—I couldn’t make him understand about her when she was sick. He let that squalling brat crawl over her, and let her do baking and things she wasn’t fit to do till she was worn out,” the old doctor said resentfully. Then added as an afterthought, “Say! You’re not letting him run you into debt, are you?”

“No debts in mine. There’s one note and It’ll be cleared up as soon as the small grain can be disposed of. I put the clamps on that as soon as I heard of it. It won’t happen again. I think his wife was about as glad of the end of the credit business as any of us,” Hugh said, and then added with a laugh: “I think you’re mistaken about his treatment of her, though. You should have heard the directions he gave me about her as the train was about to pull out; you’d have thought she was his favourite child and that I was going to neglect her.”

Doctor Morgan snorted contemptuously.

“Oh, yes, I know him. Hunter loves to give directions to anything from a puppy dog to a preacher. That’s what’s the matter with her. He directs *her* all the time as if she didn’t have sense enough to cook hot water or wash the baby. He ain’t any worse than a lot of men I know of, but you expect more of a man that’s half-educated. I tell you, Noland, the trouble ’s in this business of men owning women. I’ve practised in these parts ever since this country’s been opened, and I see a good deal of husbands—and they’re a bad lot.”

Hugh Noland watched the old doctor with a twinkle in his eye.

“You aren’t going to give us men all a knock, are you?” he said amusedly.

“I’m not saying anybody’s bad,” Doctor Morgan said, following out his own reasonings. “The trouble ’s in men owning everything. Theoretically, a woman shares in the property, and of course she does if she gets a divorce, but as long as she lives with him he’s the one that has the money and she has to ask for it if she has ever so little. You take Mrs. Hunter: she don’t spend a cent he don’t oversee and comment on; she’s dependent on that man for every bite she eats and for every stitch she wears and he interferes with every blessed thing she does. Give that woman some money of her own, Noland, and where’d she be? John Hunter ’d treat her as an equal in a minute; he’d know she could quit, and he’d come to terms.”

Doctor Morgan swung the stethoscope with which he had been listening to Hugh’s heart, and proceeded without waiting for Hugh to speak.

“Oh, we doctors see a side of women’s lives you other men don’t know anything about. We see them suffer, and we know that the medicine we give them is all knocked out by the doings of the men they live with, and we can’t raise our hands to stop the thing at the bottom of it all. Why, that woman’s just lost a child I know she was glad to lose, and—oh, don’t misunderstand me! She never told me she was glad she lost it, but how in God’s name could she be otherwise? She couldn’t do all he required of her without it. She had butter to make, and shellers to cook for, and then the damned fool ’d shove that heavy baby on her—and he actually talked to me about her being cross!”

Hugh Noland was beginning to feel that living in a man’s house did not constitute a knowledge

of him, and yet there were the things he himself had seen and heard.

“But, he’s looking after her now as if she were a baby herself,” he protested. “He urged me to look after her, and see that she didn’t have to lift Jack yet for a while, and to humour the hired girl for fear they’d lose her, and he even insisted that I keep up the reading aloud that I’ve been doing for them.”

“I don’t doubt that,” the old doctor said, a bit nettled. “He’s not all bad. He’s a right good fellow —that’s the very point I’m trying to make. It’s because he *owns* her and thinks he has a right to run her affairs—that’s the trouble at the bottom of the whole thing. Now that she’s sick he’ll see that she don’t have to lift the baby. If she owned herself she could stop lifting the baby before she got sick; a man can’t tell when a woman feels like working and when she don’t. What I want to say is, that a man browbeats a woman because she hasn’t any money and can’t help herself. Give a woman a home of her own that he couldn’t touch, and then give her an income fit to raise her children, and he’d come into that house and behave, or he’d be sent out again, and she wouldn’t age ten years in three, nor be dragged down to the hell of nagging to protect herself against him. I tell you, Noland, Kansas would be a stronger state right now, and a damned sight stronger state twenty years from now, if the women owned and run half of its affairs at least.” Doctor Morgan ended quite out of breath.

“I guess you’re right, doctor, but I’ve got to get some barb wire loaded to take home, and you’ve preached the regulation hour and a half,” Hugh said. He was living in the Hunter home, and he really loved both John Hunter and his wife, and honour demanded that he should not gossip about them.

“Right you are, my boy. And I see your point too; I’ve no business to talk professional secrets even to you.” He laid his arm affectionately across the younger man’s shoulder and squared him around so that he could look into his face. “This is only a side of life I battle with in almost every home I go into. I’m almost glad you can’t marry; It’ll leave you where I can respect you. Think of a woman having a child she don’t want! and think of a man respecting himself afterward! It destroys a woman’s body, but the men—well, it’s the most damnable, soul-destroying thing in a man’s life; he’s lost and don’t even know it. Run along,” he said after a pause, “or I’ll hold forth for another hour in an unprofessional way. It makes me swear to see a pretty girl made old before she’s twenty-five.”

But Elizabeth Hunter was not to be an old woman before she was twenty-five, for Elizabeth had Hepsie in the kitchen, she had learned to protect herself by refusing to be oppressed about the work she did do, and the weeks of rest that followed John’s going were filled with the things which rested and restored her. It was not long till she was as attractive as she had ever been in all the years of her girlhood. Elizabeth was barely twenty-three, and there was a good constitution back of her which rest could set right; she was one of nature’s favourites to whom colour and spirits return quickly. Every charm of person she had was enhanced by her present surroundings, for the brightness and freedom which came from John’s absence were the crowning things needed to complete her recovery.

Hugh Noland read to Elizabeth nightly, and in the daytime her comfort was his first thought. The work of cooking for those shellers had been his work as much as John’s, but it had all fallen on her, fallen, according to Doctor Morgan, at a time when a man shielded even the mare in his harness from overwork. As he watched the colour come back to the girl’s face day by day he recognized that the miracle was brought about by rest. In the return of Elizabeth’s beauty there was a new element which Hugh Noland saw but did not recognize as new: to the roundness of girlhood was added the strength and experience of womanhood, to the mere physical charm of youth the maturity and poise of the woman who has fought, if not conquered, self.

John had set the example of late hours, and the two read throughout the long, early summer evenings quite as much from habit as from inclination. It had been the established custom of the house for so long that Hepsie and the hired man accepted it as a matter of course. The men saw little of it because one of the first things Hugh had done when he had returned from Mitchell County had been to partition off a room in the well-built barn for the accommodation of the men. Jake, who loved Elizabeth with a dog-like fidelity, came and went about the house more freely than the rest, and saw the two seated about the sitting-room lamp, and was as glad as if he had had a place among them.

“It’s hers, God bless ’er!” he had said the night after John’s departure, “an’ I’m mighty glad she’s got it. She ain’t had much t’ make ’er glad since I’ve been around these diggin’s.”

Those were evenings never to be forgotten. As Hugh read, Elizabeth listened with the open-mouthed joy of girlhood, but the substance of what they read was viewed from the standpoint of a woman. Hugh found the girl’s mind keen and alert. They began to turn to the classics, and Hugh Noland, whose profession it had been to teach, was surprised and delighted with the aptitude and viewpoints of his pupil. Elizabeth pursued literature with her usual thoroughgoing absorption; the dictionary was brought out and laid upon the table, and with it she spent long hours when Hugh was in the field.

The second week in June, Hugh Noland was brought to a sudden stop in the delicious holiday experience by a remark of Elizabeth’s. The book had been finished earlier than was usual for them to stop reading, and it had been decided that it was too late to begin another that night. Hugh was not ready to go to bed, and sat watching her as she straightened up the littered table. A book of poems they had once read fell open and the girl picked it up and began to read to herself. In a moment she was literally engulfed in it, and he watched her deep abstraction in full

sympathy with the mood it represented. Presently she began to read aloud.

Elizabeth read on and on, and Hugh dropped back into his chair and listened, studying her as she stood before him reading so intently that she forgot that she stood. When the end was reached she dropped the book on the table with a rapturous indrawn breath.

“I never knew what real happiness was before,” she said. “I wonder if they read in heaven?”

“They’d have to let us read in our heaven or it wouldn’t be heaven,” Hugh Noland replied.

With the words still in his mouth he realized what he had said. The serpent had invaded their paradise: henceforth they would wander outside of its confines. With a self-conscious flush, he shifted the eyes into which she was looking, and arose to say good-night.

Although she did not understand it, Elizabeth also turned hastily away; Hugh Noland’s embarrassment communicated itself to her. Her confusion puzzled her. Glancing at the clock, she saw that it was near midnight; she had read longer than she had thought. In her surprised 438
consideration of what Hepsie would think if she should hear Hugh pass her door at that hour, she got the first burst of light on the subject. Until now she had gone along night after night reading with Hugh Noland, absorbed in the books, and without any sort of attitude toward the man except that of good-fellowship, but now she stood revealed to herself and was covered with shame. That Hugh might be in love with her did not occur to her, but that he knew that she had feelings out of keeping with her vows of marriage she felt certain, and with her usual intensity Elizabeth went over the mark in her shame and contrition.

“What must he have thought I meant? What must he think of me as a woman? Worse yet, what must he think of me as a wife?” she asked herself, and each question left her more bitterly humiliated, more self-distrusting, more unhappy.

They were to learn, however, that three months of continual association over the books had formed a habit not easily laid aside. To the habit of intellectual companionship had been added the joy of close and reciprocated affection, and the sudden breaking off of this daily communication left both of them, especially Hugh, in a condition of almost tragic loneliness, but honest of heart and true of purpose, both avoided further readings.

The nights were hot now; “good corn weather,” Jake called it, and the time had come to “lay by” the early planting. John’s absence had retarded the plowing, for try as he would the chores kept 439
Hugh late in the morning and had compelled him to quit early at night. It had not been his intention to take the place of an active field worker, but the season had come on so rapidly that the weeds threatened to get the better of the hired men, and though it was all to learn over again, Hugh had gone out with the intention of doing good work and had succeeded, to Jake’s astonishment and great admiration. It served Hugh’s plans at this point to put in the long hours away from the house, knowing that otherwise he would fall back into the old life of the book at once. At first the heavy cultivator handles absorbed his time and thought, for it was fifteen years since Hugh Noland had cultivated corn, but when the work became more mechanical his mind wandered back to forbidden ground and the days were harder than any he had ever known.

One frightfully hot day, near the end of the plowing of the first field, which lay near the house, Hugh found it necessary to rest the horses frequently. With each period of rest his thoughts returned to Elizabeth with new force and longing; his mind worked continually on the reading matter they had gone over, and constantly he wanted to elaborate or discuss some subject left unfinished. It was the devil with which he had to wrestle. Also, she showed the strain of disappointment when he met her at meals, and he found himself struggling with Doctor Morgan’s observations on her health, her husband, and her happiness. As far as John was concerned, he thought the old doctor was mistaken, and be it remembered, Hugh Noland had a 440
genuine liking for John Hunter. That liking added to the seriousness of his situation in John Hunter’s home.

He mopped his perspiring brow, while little wet lines showed in the creases of his sleeves and across the back of his thin summer shirt. The fierce heat parched his mouth and his whole burning body called for a drink. Tying his team to a post an hour after noon he vaulted over the fence and walked to the creek, picking his way down to the narrow stream. The heat of summer was drying the brook up rapidly; already there was but a tiny rivulet, but such as was left curled and trickled between grassy banks in a manner to attract the eye of a thirsty man. Hugh knelt on a hummock with his hand on the opposite bank and drank as only the man who plows corn on a hot June day can. As he stood up he paused with his handkerchief halfway to his face and listened, while the water dripped from nose and chin unheeded. The continuous tones of a voice reading aloud reached him. It was such a curious place to encounter such a phenomenon that he listened intently for a moment.

“Elizabeth!” he whispered.

Every pulse in Hugh Noland’s body pounded suddenly. On the first impulse he was away in her direction, walking rapidly and without effort at concealment. Without taking time to think, without knowing or caring whether it were wise, he walked as straight toward the spot as the laden bee to the hive.

Hugh’s coming fell upon Elizabeth suddenly, but the perfect naturalness of her joy put him at his ease. 441

“I heard you reading,” he said simply. “What are you working on now?”

He threw himself down on the grass beside the willow trunk on which she was seated and held

out his hand for the book. After running his eye over the page he handed it back to her with the request that she read on. The heat of the summer day shimmered along the horizon outside, but here in the cool shade of the willows the delicious afternoon air lulled his senses and made of the spot a paradise of comfort and contentment. The girl was the embodiment of everything sweet and womanly to him, and the joy of the moment, bringing added colour to her cheeks, made the utmost contrast imaginable to the dust and drudgery of the afternoon in the corn rows.

Hugh's coming had been so obviously voluntary and joyous that the fear she had entertained, that he would think ill of her as John Hunter's wife, was set at rest. The old confidence, sympathy, and companionship were retendered, and the girl met it with her habitual openness. She accepted the book from his hand and read as asked. Hugh Noland watched her earnestly, and recalled the things he had been told about her and her affairs. On more than one occasion he had been told that she had been neglected, and at the time had put the tale away as foolish farm gossip, but Doctor Morgan was no fool, and his gossip was usually not only true but had on this particular occasion fallen out with vehemence and conviction. As he looked at her he asked himself how any man could neglect a woman of Elizabeth's sincere qualities. She was so true 442
that the only indication that he had ever received of even a slight difference of opinion with her husband had been the accidental one regarding debts. He remembered a remark of Sadie Hansen's to the effect that John Hunter never took his wife anywhere, and he remembered that in the four months he had been in the house he had never heard him offer to do so, and then Hugh Noland remembered that he had no right to think about it at all. However, his mind recurred to it in spite of all he could do, and presently he was immersed in the old consideration. Loyalty must be one of her qualities: four months he had been in her house and she had never been taken anywhere except to Nathan's, where he himself had taken her, and she had never remarked upon it, and she was but twenty-three!

"Twenty-three!" he said under his breath.

"What was it you said?" Elizabeth asked, looking up.

"Nothing," he replied guiltily.

Elizabeth became conscious and embarrassed.

"I've kept you all afternoon!" she exclaimed, getting suddenly to her feet.

"I wanted to be kept," Hugh admitted slowly, rising also. "It's frightfully hot in the middle of the afternoon. I'll work late, and milk after dark."

"I'll bring up the cows and do the milking," she volunteered.

"Let me see you!" he protested, and went to his work again.

Hugh Noland had never even guessed that he would walk deliberately over and spend a whole 443
afternoon with a woman he had no right to love after becoming aware that he was already in love with her. For the first time he stood in the limelight of strong emotions and knew himself for what he was, not only that he was a mere man, but that he was a man who was not showing the proper control over feelings and emotions which thousands of men and women alike controlled every day. He worked his problem over as he worked the mellow soil about the corn roots and made himself late, but with contradictory impulses hurried the milking when he did get at it so as to get down to the book again.

Elizabeth had taken time to think out her side of their position, and told herself that she hoped that Hugh would not offer to read to-night, but as the time approached she trimmed the lamp and arranged the books on the sitting-room table with a slight sense of worry for fear he would not come, and conscious that the evening was going fast. It was late when they began, and correspondingly late when they finished the reading that night.

The next night Hugh sat on the upturned manure cart talking to the men till he saw Elizabeth put out the light in the sitting room, and then, in spite of the fact that he had been strong enough to stay away, was sorry that he had not had one more night's reading with her before John came home. John was coming in the morning, and Hugh was to meet him, and Hugh Noland did not like himself, nor the position he would be in when he thought of greeting John Hunter as a friend. 444

The better to think things out and decide what he would do, Hugh sat down on the doorstep and did not go in. The night was perfect. There was a full moon and the soft breeze was a delicious reminder of the coolness of the leafy bower among the willows where he had spent the afternoon with Elizabeth. There was to be no more of Elizabeth for him, God bless her! Elizabeth was a wife and honour demanded that not even a glance of affection pass between them. This Hugh Noland believed, and yet when they were together their little embarrassments cried their love aloud, and neither could mentally avoid the issue. Each had known that the other had resolved and suffered and fallen into the temptation of the reading. The book was becoming a delicious torment. He could not stay in that house. Plainly, it was going to be necessary for him to go away. The business demanded his attention, and he decided to go to Mitchell County. At that point Hugh stopped in his calculations to consider how things would run at this end of the line if he did so.

In summing the business up, Hugh summed up his impression of John Hunter along with it, and found himself reluctant to go away and leave everything in his hands. John was industrious and tidy about his work. Dear old John! He had come very near Hugh's heart in the short time they had been together. The daily consideration of possible death had mellowed Hugh Noland's

naturally fine nature, and given him the tenderness of attitude and thought that the sublime and inevitable impose upon those who live in its shadow. Actions considered as final are warmer and less likely to be inconsiderate than those where there is a feeling of indefinite time to correct mistakes. Hugh sat now and let his heart run out to John with all the love of a more than usually affectionate nature. In his heart he wanted John back home, and yet it made him uneasy. There was a peculiar sense of being a traitor as he considered the meeting with this man who had trusted his home in his hands. In regard to the business, he, Hugh, would have to let things take their own course. All he had on earth was in this farm now, but he would get away as soon as he could possibly do so; he would sacrifice that much to the man whose home he had entered. Hugh knew to a nicety how necessary it would be for his interests in a business way to be here on the ground and keep John Hunter from going into debt. Hugh had his own judgment, neighbourhood gossip, and Doctor Morgan's plain instructions on that point, but was resolved to go if he lost all that he had in so doing. "Well, at any rate, he can't mortgage anything without consulting me, and I'll get as much of the stock out there as I can after next year—that is, if there is any next year for me," he said, as he got up to go to bed long after midnight.

The morning of John's return Elizabeth asked Hugh to take her as far as Nathan's on his way in to town. Hugh had not sat on the step till midnight the night before to let himself fall into temptation the first thing in the morning, and suggested that since the shafts of the buggy were mended that she drive over to Nathan's alone, giving as his reason that he might be unable to come back promptly. The girl fell into his plan so readily that Hugh in his contradictory frame of mind wondered about it and was half hurt. As he hitched Patsie into the shafts, however, he reasoned it out that Elizabeth Hunter was probably making the same fight that he was making. He tied the mare in the side lane and left her there without going to the house as usual to help with Jack. If she were fighting for her own esteem, as he was doing, Hugh resolved not to be the cause of temptation; it made him feel a little better about meeting John. Could he have known, as Elizabeth did, that it was the first time since her marriage that she had had the privilege of driving alone and that the precedent once established would settle the possibility of demanding a horse whenever she wanted it, it would have put a different complexion on the matter.

In order for Elizabeth to use the buggy, however, Hugh was obliged to drive the strange team. Jake had been using them since John's absence, but had come in from the field the night before with the announcement that he did not intend "to risk his neck with them broncos any more." Before Hugh got to Colebyville he was thoroughly displeased with them, and spoke of his dislike of them to John on the way home.

"A few days on the harvester 'll fix them," John replied.

"Well, they're acting better than they did on the way in. They're hot and tired, and maybe the harvester will do it, but they're a bad lot," Hugh replied wearily. "I feel that I've got to get away to Mitchell County. The cattle have been on my mind for days. You'll have this team on your hands, for none of the men but Jake would try to use them, and he told me last night he'd used them for the last time."

"Aren't you well, Hugh?" John Hunter asked with such concern that Hugh was covered with humiliation and shame.

"Oh, yes-s-s. But you can run the place and I'm not hanging out like I thought I could—and I like it down there; it's more like the life I've been ordered to lead."

"Wait till the rye has been cut. Did you say Silas wanted us to cut his too?" John Hunter asked.

"Yes. He stopped me as I drove over this morning. The boys will lay the early corn by to-day; we can get the binder out to-morrow and see that it is ready by the day after. We might have been through with the corn to-day, but I've been lazy of late. I knocked off and rested and read most of the hot part of yesterday afternoon," Hugh replied slowly. He wished in his heart that he could tell all.

"That's the thing to do. I'm not going to have you going down to Mitchell County while it's so hot. You'll lay around the house and read, that's what You'll do, and I'll run this farm for a while."

The thought of that took Hugh Noland's breath. That was what he was running away from, but he could think of no reason but his health, and dropped the subject to get away from it.

John Hunter asked questions about every feature of the farm work, and as he asked watched Hugh's face, looking anxiously for signs of breaking health. Under no conditions would he let Hugh get sick. Hugh had been the happiest circumstance of this farming experience. There was a discouraged note in Hugh's voice that John did not like.

"Did you see Morgan to-day?" he asked after he had had all the farm work explained to him.

"Oh, now, don't you get to worrying because I happen to mention my health. Yes, I saw Morgan, and he agreed with me that the other place would be better for me. I can run that and you can run this, and with care we ought to make some money pretty soon."

"But that takes you away from us and—and we want you here!" John exclaimed with such fervour that Hugh winced under it.

Hugh smiled so sadly back at the eager, boyish face turned to his that John was more than ever sure he was ill. His hand shot out to him with an almost womanish sympathy.

"We'll see to it that you're kept busy where you belong, and the work won't wear you out either, my boy," he said.

Hugh saw that he was getting deeper in at every word he uttered and went back to a discussion of the farm work.

Elizabeth waited intentionally till she saw the men pass Nathan's house before she started home. Try as she would, she did not yearn for her husband's return. Life was short, her youth was going fast, and her fear of the faded life grew as she looked forward to an old age spent with John Hunter after Hugh's departure. Hugh must go, there was no question about that. He had told her night before last that he thought of it; had spoken of it incidentally enough, but in such wise that the girl knew why he was going. She had felt at the time that Hugh listened for her reply, but there was none she could make, and her silence added the final word to his decision. Elizabeth knew that it was the only honourable course; she consented to it in her mind, and yet, as she looked ahead to a time when she could not have him to take shelter behind with the cream jars of her life, she was sick at what she must face. Even to-day she hoped that he would be present when she drove Patsie into the yard. 449

Fortune favoured Elizabeth in getting home with the horse and buggy. John had said that he was going to the pasture to look over the stock, and when Hugh saw Elizabeth drive through the gate they had left open, there was nothing for him to do but go forward to take her horse. John had seen her coming and had come back from the pasture gate, and the three met.

"See how brave I have become in your absence," she said.

"Well, I guess you've driven horses as long as I have," John Hunter replied happily, and kissed the astonished wife and the child in her arms with such real pleasure in returning to them that it was good to meet him after all.

"If he'd always be like that," Elizabeth thought wistfully, and Hugh Noland felt more like a criminal in the presence of that kiss than he had ever done in his life. 450

"Here, I'll tie Patsie up after I give her a drink. You go in with Elizabeth and I'll follow as soon as its done," John said to Hugh, and turning to Elizabeth said, "You haven't taken very good care of him since I've been away, dear. Go on in and get a book and I'll listen for an hour before I go to the pasture."

"I'll do no such thing. I'll go to that pasture with you—that's what I'll do. I'm not sick. Rats! Elizabeth knows I——"

Hugh Noland stopped short, "I beg your pardon, Mrs. Hunter," he added confusedly.

"I don't know why you shouldn't call me by my first name; I do you," Elizabeth answered, glad in spite of herself.

Hugh went away with John, and Elizabeth had a long time to think about it. It was the first time Hugh had ever dropped into the least familiarity in addressing her, and no amount of reasoning could keep her from feeling a thrill of pleasure over it. She did not approve of herself, but the thrill was there. She hated herself, but the thrill remained. She wondered bitterly if she would ever be able to approve of herself again; every turn of life's wheel brought out some new and hitherto unsuspected characteristic, and try as she would she could not make herself do as her code of morals demanded that she should. She thought of her various friends; none of them had ever been guilty of the things Elizabeth found herself culpable of. Sadie had rebelled against her first child, but when shown the consequences had cheerfully applied the lesson, while she, Elizabeth, had been unable to put into practice later the very precepts she had so glibly given her neighbour. None of her friends had ever committed the folly of falling in love with men who were not their husbands. 451

Elizabeth would not stay for the reading that night, and had a bad hour before she fell asleep. Her love for Hugh looked even worse to her since John's arrival than it had done before. This new phase of her life was even less able to command respect than any which had preceded it. Why was she vexed with such unheard of temptations? It did not comfort her to reason it out that this thing had fallen upon her without any wish of hers, that the thrill which had followed his use of her name was not a thing she had deliberately fostered within herself; she demanded of herself that she should not thrill at his voice, not knowing that she demanded the impossible.

The rye was to be cut at Silas Chamberlain's. John suggested to Elizabeth that she had better go over to help Liza Ann, since she was alone, saying that he would take her over when he went. Hugh was to go with the machine. Jake would drive the extra team over, and the other two men would plow corn at home. A few minutes before nine o'clock John announced that he was ready. He had come in to carry Jack to the buggy for her. John had gone away with the impressions of Elizabeth's illness still upon him, and looked out for her with the same care he had accorded her when an invalid. 452

"How long?" he asked, dropping down on the foot of the bed beside the machine upon which she had been putting in the spare time.

"Just this one little seam; I'll have it done then."

She stooped over the machine to finish the seam quickly, not liking to keep John waiting when he was already somewhat late.

Jack slipped from his father's lap, and fascinated by the swiftly moving wheel on a level with his face, put out a pudgy little forefinger to feel of it as it went around. His mother saw it and stopped short with a little cry of alarm.

"Don't do that, Jack!" she said sharply. "It'll take your finger right off of your hand if you get it

in there.”

Jack put his hand behind his little back, and stood in round-eyed wonder watching the wheel as she started to sew again.

John was getting restless and wanted to go.

“Aren’t you about——”

Elizabeth looked up at him as he started to speak, and Jack’s finger shot out to the forbidden wheel on the instant. Elizabeth saw it at a point when she could not control the pedal with her foot. Mother love brought a scream to her lips, and to save the child she gave him a shove with her hand. Jack fell on the floor in a heap, striking his head on the bedpost as he did so.

John had clutched at him ineffectually as he fell and caught him up as soon as he could get hold of him, turning him over in his arms to see where he was hurt. The blood spurted from the little nose, giving an appearance of serious injury to the matter all out of proportion to the exact nature of the damage sustained, but as usual, when excited, John saw only surface indications.

“What does possess you when you’re cross?” he exclaimed as he relinquished his hold on the baby, who, however badly he might be hurt, was struggling to get to his mother’s arms.

Elizabeth carried the screaming child to the kitchen to bathe the bruised nose and apply a wet cloth to the nasty blue ridge beginning to form where the little cheek had encountered the bedpost.

“I never saw any one act like you do with a child,” John said with his usual irritation.

“I didn’t intend to knock him over, but I couldn’t stop my foot and I thought he’d get his little finger taken right off before my very eyes.”

“Well, you shouldn’t go at him so rough. You always treat him as if he were a block of wood.”

Elizabeth’s lips closed down tight, and to keep Jack from hearing further criticisms of her management she went back to the bedroom. When John was ready to go he called to her from the lane, and she carried Jack to the door instead of laying him down.

“Take Hepsie with you. Tell Mrs. Chamberlain that I got ready to come. He’d probably be cross if I went now. Hepsie’s in the potato patch,” Elizabeth said in a low voice, and went back so promptly that John could not reply.

John took Hepsie with him, and explained to Liza Ann, as Elizabeth requested, that she was unable to come because Jack had hurt himself.

The day was dry and hot, and John Hunter consumed water like a fish upon all occasions. The discovery that the water-jugs had been left at home called for instant action when he arrived in the field. Silas had put his team on the binder and Patsie was free for use on just such errands as this. The machine had just been driven up to where Hugh could ask for water also. John crossed over and laid his hand on the lines.

“Here, you take the horse and go for the water. I forgot the jugs; You’ll have to go clear home after them.”

“Why don’t you do it?” Hugh asked.

John Hunter looked him over rather sharply and replied:

“Because I’m going to drive this binder to-day. I don’t like your voice very well since I got home, Hugh.”

“You won’t hear very much more of it if I can get away day after to-morrow,” Hugh replied, smiling at the turn he had given to John’s sympathy.

John Hunter grinned back at him, but kept his hand on the lines, and Hugh got down.

“You can’t start day after to-morrow, for we won’t get this rye done, and you won’t start then, my boy, with such a note in your voice as that. I’ve spoken to Jake about it and he’ll go. I don’t propose to have you that far away when you are not well—it ain’t what we want you for. Go on and get that water,” he added when he saw the expression of protest in Hugh’s face.

Hugh went without argument, but his determination was as strong as ever. Instead of going around the road he drove across the field to the fence between the two places, and, tying Patsie, walked through the cornfield to the pasture and on toward the house.

The hot sun blazed fiercely down on his thinly clad back, and he noticed as he struggled through the tasselling corn that the leaves were already firing about the roots. Rain was essential, but he reflected that enough rain to do the corn any good would ruin the small grain now ready to cut. “Kansas luck,” he muttered as he crossed the deep ridges thrown up by his own cultivator a few days before. Not a breath of air was stirring, and by the time he had reached the house he was hot and tired. Reflecting that John had taken Elizabeth to Chamberlain’s, he decided to rest before he started back with the heavy water-jugs. He stopped in the kitchen for a drink and took a small bottle out of his pocket.

“Two, I guess, this time,” he said as he poured the tablets into his hand. He dropped his finger on the other wrist a moment, and then swallowed both pellets.

Elizabeth heard him settle himself in a rocking chair with a long-drawn breath of comfort. She was giving Jack little pats to ease him off to sleep and the house was very quiet. She decided to keep still and let him return to the field without seeing her tear-stained face, but Jack roused

with a low whimpering cry which she felt sure Hugh must have heard, and as soon as the child was asleep she walked out without further effort at concealment.

At the noise of the opening door Hugh Noland sprang to his feet in surprise; he had been half-asleep.

“Why, I didn’t know that you were here!” he exclaimed when he saw that it was Elizabeth. “I thought you went to Chamberlain’s.”

His eyes riveted themselves upon her swollen eyelids, and when she stood embarrassed before him and did not reply readily, conscious only of his searching gaze, he misunderstood and added gravely:

“Elizabeth, there is something I must speak about. I cannot have you worried over matters between us——”

Elizabeth Hunter’s eyes ceased to be shy and troubled and came up to his in such complete astonishment that he broke off in confusion.

There was a pause for one short second, and then Elizabeth spoke in nervous haste, and as if to ward off something.

“I—I—I wasn’t crying about—that is, I hurt Jack accidentally and—and John misunderstood.”

Even while the words were still in her mouth, she realized by his expression that what she was saying sounded like a complaint, as if she were exposing a difference between herself and her husband, and that was the one thing that under no circumstances had she ever done. She made a frightened stop without ending the sentence.

As if to save his mother from needless embarrassment, Jack slipped to the floor and came stumbling out on sleepy legs, tired and cross, and rubbing his sweaty little face with hot, sweaty little fists, and demanding his mother’s attention. Elizabeth turned to him with a relief beyond words.

Hugh Noland, who had always loved the child, was never so glad to see him, and slipped away while he was being soothed and petted out of his tears and discomfort. Both Hugh and Elizabeth knew that but for Jack’s timely interruption words would have escaped Hugh that they both preferred should not be uttered. Both knew the situation, but both saw that it would be easier, as well as safer and more honourable, not to discuss it.

“I’ll not think any more about going away—I wouldn’t do it if I had money,” she decided as she watched Hugh return with his jug. “I married John Hunter in good faith, and I’ll live with him in good faith and straighten things out.” The thought of her love for Hugh came up and she added, “I don’t care! I didn’t go out to hunt up a love for him and I can’t help it if it has come to me; but I hope he gets away to Mitchell County day after to-morrow.”

CHAPTER XXI

BOUND TO THE STAKE

The harvesting dragged out to the third day, and Silas, who had a felon, could not give help when John came to the point of cutting his own grain. It was almost impossible to get help, for the reason that the dry weather had hastened the reaping of all early crops. It was decided that Elizabeth should drive back and forth with the water, and John take a hand at the shocking. This left Hugh on the machine, a thing John disliked to do, but Hugh made no complaints and accepted the post readily. Hugh had seen that he could not refer to his health without endangering his chance of getting away. John looked him over critically as he mounted the binder, realizing fully that he was unfit to ride in the hot sun all day.

“I’ll take his place this afternoon if the shocking never gets done,” was his mental resolve as he turned to his own share of the work.

The men had taken one jug of water with them, so that it was not necessary for Elizabeth to go with a fresh one till ten o’clock. She tied Patsie to the fence and, taking Jack with her, crawled under and started across the field to a point where she could meet the oncoming binder, so that Hugh could take the heavy jug on the machine around to the other side of the field where the shockers were. Jack’s short legs had hard work in the stubble, and she kept a tight hold on him with one hand while she carried the jug with the other.

Hugh saw them coming and called to her to wait till he could come for the jug. Doctor Morgan had especially cautioned against heavy lifting.

The new team which John had bought was hitched to the pole of the harvester, and as he drew them up, a botfly buzzed suddenly about the forelegs of the off-wheel horse. The animal struck at it angrily with its foot, giving a shrill snort. Its mate threw itself to the other side, rattling the double-trees of the leaders against their heels. There was a frightened spring on the part of one

of the horses in front, and at that the wild and half-broken wheel horses began to plunge ahead.

Thoroughly frightened, the four horses became unmanageable at once, and the one nearest the revolving reel got its tail over the line, where it held firmly to it as it reared and kicked. Almost before it was clear what had happened, the horses were on a full run down the field, with a barbed-wire fence ahead. Hugh could do but one thing. He circled them about toward the outside of the field by the one line he could control, while he frantically jammed the lever down, which threw the machine out of gear, but at the speed at which the machine was going the lever would not act. The one line swung the horses around in a short circle, and as the thoroughly alarmed man raised his head he was horrified to find that Elizabeth, encumbered with the jug, 460
and so thoroughly frightened that she held on to it and to Jack's hand with equal tenacity, was within the radius of the circle.

The baby, the mother, and the heavy water-jug were in the centre of that narrowing ring, and the natural and spontaneous thing to do was to run in the direction away from the careening harvester. They ran, but only for a few yards, for by the time they thought that they were nearing a point of safety at the circumference of the circle, the horses were nearing that point also, and to attempt to cross it was suicidal.

"Go back!" shouted Hugh, his whole body breaking into a cold sweat as the woman and child turned to run in the opposite direction.

Had presence of mind been possible at that moment, Elizabeth could have slipped quickly behind the binder and passed outside the ring the charging animals were making, but as it was, she simply ran blindly back once more to another and more dangerous point inside their lessening orbit. One more such run and both mother and child would be exhausted.

With the cold sweat of terror breaking over him, Hugh Noland slackened his hold on the line and flung himself off the high seat to run to her assistance. As he jumped, the horses of their own accord turned sharper yet, and the bull-wheel, striking a badger hole, threw the machine over sidewise and completely upside down. The wheel horses, released by the coupling-pin falling from the main clevis, kicked themselves loose from the other team and tore madly across 461
the uncut grain.

Elizabeth Hunter escaped death by the overturning of the heavy binder, but when she arrived at the twisted and broken harvester, Hugh Noland lay pinned under the wreckage, white and insensible.

It took but a few moments for the men, who had come running at the first sounds of the commotion, to lift the heavy machinery from the limp body and lay the wounded man down under the shade of a large shock of rye. While Luther bent to examine the senseless form, John rushed one of the men frantically off for Doctor Morgan.

"No! Wait—I'll go myself!" he called as the man was driving away, and flinging himself into the buggy, which Elizabeth had left at the fence, laid the whip on the back of the frightened Patsie.

It was not till John was halfway to Colebyville that Hugh Noland opened his eyes. Luther was stooping over him, bathing his face with water from the jug which Elizabeth had so unconsciously provided. The girl also knelt at his side rendering such assistance as was in her power, and when Hugh actually showed signs of being alive she buried her face in her hands and sobbed with an abandon which Luther Hansen could not mistake. The hired men had gone to get the leaders, which, being reliable horses, had got over their fright and were nibbling the fresh grass by the fence. The other team was completely out of sight. They covered Hugh from the scorching sun till the men could bring the wagon from the barn, and then the sad little 462
cavalcade returned to the house with the injured man.

Doctor Morgan arrived with John in his own buggy two hours later, and then a strange thing was discovered. No bones were broken, and no internal injuries were in evidence which would necessarily give cause for alarm. The examination pointed to an excited heart chiefly, the weakest link in Hugh Noland's system and the place where new troubles centred and aggravated old ones. That the man's life had not been instantaneously crushed out was due to the fact that the long steel levers had stuck in the hard earth and held the machine up. But the trouble with the heart had been accentuated acutely before the binder had even capsized, for that horrible nightmare of galloping down upon the girl had evidently begun what the later catastrophe had carried to a farther and really dangerous stage.

Hugh was placed in the downstairs bedroom by the men, whose hearts were wrung at every step they carried him, and, as Luther remarked, because Elizabeth would have the care of him and stairs were deadly things in case of sickness.

Doctor Morgan came again before night, intending to stay with the patient till morning. John met him at the gate. With the feeling that he had been responsible for this terrible accident to Hugh, whom he loved as he had never loved any other human being, John had spent an afternoon of agony. The rest of the men could look for a neighbour to finish the grain with 463
another machine, but for him, he spent the time at Hugh's side.

"How is he?" Doctor Morgan asked almost before he was within speaking distance.

"Resting. We don't trouble him, but he seems quiet."

"That's good!" the old man exclaimed. He had come with his heart in his mouth, as they say in that country. "I wish I had as good a report for you," he added.

"Why—what's happened to me?" John asked in surprise.

“The young mare you drove in died in the stable. It’s hot weather, and I guess you were pretty badly excited. I told the men in the livery to shut the colt up; it kept nosing around the carcass and it isn’t good for it. You’d better get in as early as you can and look after it yourself. Those stable men don’t care for anything that ain’t their own.”

John Hunter stood speechless till the end of the story, and then helped tie the doctor’s team.

“That all comes from that miserable team! I’m glad one of them did have to be shot. I’ve half a notion to shoot the other one; it’s all cut up by the wire and ’ll take no end of trouble to cure. Hugh said horses and dogs talked with their tails, and I guess they do. Say, will you tell Elizabeth about the horse? It’s one I got from her father and she’s terribly fond of it.”

Elizabeth met Doctor Morgan as he came from Hugh’s room a few minutes later with the unspoken question so plainly evident in her face that he answered it without waiting to be asked.

“No signs of further trouble, little woman, thank God! They tell me you were near being run over by that binder too.”

Elizabeth evaded the last remark.

“That’s nothing. But are you sure about Hugh?” she asked in a voice that quavered a little.

“Now look here,” the doctor said, concerned at once for her welfare. “We can’t have you go and get upset. It looks as if Noland got out of that pretty lucky. The only thing that’s worrying me is that infernal heart of his.”

John came in at that point and the old doctor addressed himself to him.

“This woman’ll have to take care of Noland, Hunter, and I want you to see to it that she don’t have another thing to do. She can’t have that child dragging on her, and we’ll have to look out that she don’t overdo, or we’ll have her down on our hands too. The trouble with peritonitis is that it don’t get well as fast as it looks to. A slight thing will often start it up anew, and peritonitis is the devil if it gets to recurring.”

“We’ll all help take care of Hugh,” John promised readily.

Doctor Morgan looked at John Hunter and back to Elizabeth dubiously. He reflected that the same lack of caution which had killed the mare yesterday might kill a man in case of excitement.

“It isn’t necessarily help that she’s going to need. It won’t be so hard to take care of him, if she isn’t worried by a lot of other things. I don’t want another soul to touch that medicine. We’ve got to be mighty careful about that. Heart remedies are poison and as quick as lightning in their action, and we can’t afford to take any chances on that kind of stuff. I’m right glad to put your wife at the helm in this thing; she’s definite and dependable, two things we doctors don’t often find when we need them most.”

Turning to Elizabeth he said:

“It may be rather hard on you, but our main care is to pull this man through the next ten days. If he don’t have some one to look after him right, he may slip through our fingers.”

“Why—I thought you said he was all right,” Elizabeth faltered.

In his efforts to impress the need of care with the medicine, Doctor Morgan had gone over the mark and added to the fears he had started out to allay. Elizabeth was as white as if all the blood in her body had been taken away.

“Now don’t begin to worry till I tell you there’s need, child,” he said half irritably. “All that’s necessary is for you to look after that medicine. Noland ’ll come out all right with you to nurse him. I wouldn’t mind being sick myself, Hunter, with her to hold the spoon,” he said, trying to put a merry face on the matter. “Did it ever occur to you that you were a lucky dog to come into this country and run off with the nicest girl in it the first year you were here?”

As the doctor drove home the next morning, he said to himself:

“I guess I fixed it about that medicine;” then, his mind reverting to the conversation at the gate, he added, “I wasn’t goin’ to tell her about that horse; let him tell her himself. Blamed fool! I think I headed off his issuing orders about that sick-bed too. Poor little girl! Now if she’d only married Noland!”

The old doctor gave a long, low whistle as a sudden thought struck him, but he put it away, and being a busy man thought no more about it for weeks.

CHAPTER XXII

“THERE ARE SOME THINGS WE HAVE TO SETTLE FOR OURSELVES”

John’s being away from home those first days of Hugh’s illness—he had gone to Colebyville to

dispose of Patsie's body and secure a new team to finish harvesting—kept him from getting the run of the affairs of the sickroom, and enabled Elizabeth to assume the care of the invalid in her own way. An idea once fixed in John Hunter's head was fixed, and having accepted the plan of Doctor Morgan that Elizabeth was to be in sole charge of care and medicine, he went his way without thrusting his suggestions upon her, and Elizabeth, having learned not to discuss things with him, did not speak of her work nor of anything connected with the invalid. In fact, as soon as John entered the sickroom she went out, as one of the best ways she knew of to avoid accidents of conversation. John came to Hugh's bedside but little, supposing that he needed rest, and willing to sacrifice his all to the comfort of the pale invalid. With the tears of a woman in his heart if not in his eyes, John watched from afar the face of the man he had been the unconscious means of injuring, and tiptoed about the outer rooms with a fear of death which only John could feel. Another thing kept him out of the sickroom: impressed with the idea that 468
his carelessness in the purchase of the first team had led up to this trouble, he had gone to the other extreme in replacing them, and had paid three hundred and twenty-five dollars for one of the best and most thoroughly proven teams in the country. There were no available funds and he had been obliged to give a note for them; this must in time come to Hugh's notice, and John had a distinct remembrance of a former note, and did not wish to repeat the experience. Luther, who came often to see Hugh, had spoken to John of Patsie's death in Elizabeth's presence, and after the first pained expression of surprise and grief, Elizabeth had never mentioned it again. John had noticed also that Elizabeth had never asked the price of the last team, nor seemed to take any interest in them, and he hoped by the same means to avoid confessing to Hugh.

John Hunter was glad at this time to escape discussions of an unpleasant nature; he was more broken by the accident than he ever admitted; he accused himself more bitterly than any one would ever accuse him; he had broken up a working team, he had killed his best horse, and he had been all but responsible for the death of his best friend, and when John Hunter's own misdeeds hit hard enough, he would face things squarely, and no matter how hard he worked to avoid owning up to others, would acknowledge to himself that he was in the wrong. Hugh's white face grew whiter each day and accused him enough without further words. To escape it, John worked busily, and there was need of work, for the rapidly drying fields required his entire 469
attention during the day, and he left Hugh to his wife's care, glad to do so.

There were times, however, when John was alone with Hugh, and at such times, because he was full of self-blame and humiliation, he listened to what Hugh said with a peculiar attention. Hugh saw that John worried himself half sick over his misfortune, and reached out the hand of love and fellowship for which John hungered at this time. He talked of his possible death as if it were but a journey, which always convulsed John's face with child-like emotions. He talked of the farm work, and kept close track of what was done. He knew that John had had to go into debt for the team, and he wanted John to tell him, without being asked, that a note had been given. When he did not, Hugh passed the matter over without reference and with a sigh. Hugh Noland was not criticising John Hunter or any of his actions these days, but Hugh studied John and found his weaknesses, and tried to give him such help as he thought possible. Hugh had long days to think, and he began to yearn over this man to whom he had been a sort of traitor. He saw John's wilfulness with Elizabeth—heard many things without being able to avoid hearing them, being pinned to his bed—he saw where John's irritability lost good help during the busy season and left double duty for faithful Jake, his supercilious attitude toward Luther, and his illy concealed contempt for the farmers about them, and one of his ways of keeping his mind off John's wife was to keep it on John and John's needs. Hugh kept Luther with him whenever 470
Luther could be spared from his home in the evenings, and he spoke to John of Luther with growing affection. When he grew stronger, he discussed farm work and farmers with John in a way that savoured of interest in their problems; he asked Nathan and Silas and Carter and Bob Warren in and talked to them of fertilizers and drainage, and when John insisted that those things were in the future, he said:

"Yes, but they will come up in our time; you see I come from a place where those things were already a necessity to the farmers. I am a farmer myself now and I think about those things."

Hugh knew that his consideration of fertilizers was superfluous in a country that was hardly past the sod-corn stage, but he longed to dignify this work to John Hunter, since John would give his formative years here and be unable to do other things if he ever made money enough to get away, as he hoped. Hugh had had enough work in the agricultural department of an eastern university before he had come to Kansas, to make it possible for him to interest these men in the future development of their state. Doctor Morgan, who had been rather unwilling that serious subjects should be discussed in the sickroom, asked curiously one day:

"What the devil do you want to prate such nonsense as that to these folks for? They won't need any kind of fertilizers in this country for twenty years. You'd better be resting instead of 471
shooting such useless stuff as that at *them*."

"I want to talk farming to John Hunter as if it were a respectable business to engage in, Doctor. I don't have to tell you how he views it."

"What in Sam Hill's the difference how he views it?" the doctor asked in astonishment. "He's nothing but a cheap skate, and you can't make anything else out of him."

Hugh Noland looked at the doctor and made no reply; he understood that the unfortunate vision of John Hunter which Doctor Morgan had got would prevent him from seeing the point he was trying to make, and so let the matter drop, but he kept John with him evenings and worked along on his own lines and with persistence. He wanted to feel right about his stay in John's

home, and one of the ways of doing it was to get close to John's heart on important matters. He spoke of Jack as a future farmer, and when John indignantly resented the implication and said that he expected his son to be an educated man, Hugh replied:

"Why, of course you do, but an educated farmer is exactly the thing to make of him. Look at the clean life you'd place him in."

And so the days ran on in the sick-chamber. If John was with Hugh, Elizabeth busied herself about the house elsewhere, and John rarely saw them together, unless there was medicine to administer, and then the girl gave it without remark. A growing fear had taken possession of her lest John should fly out at her in unpleasant fashion before Hugh. The situation between the two had been made so much more acute by Hugh's accidental reference to it when he had thought that she was crying about him, that she was supersensitive regarding her half-formed complaint in explanation. But for that reference, they could have gone along indefinitely with a pretence of indifference, but enough had been said to tear away the veil and leave them self-conscious and mutually humiliated. Their little avoidances of touch or tenderness spoke in a language not to be misunderstood, and their eyes told unconsciously all that they refused to say with their tongues. 472

Elizabeth, in her own way, worried herself half sick in her endeavours to care for him gently and yet give him no cause to think she was making a demand for a love of which neither approved, but which having once been put into words was a constant factor in their association. Once when she was bathing his face, Hugh thought she lingered longer over it than was necessary and drew himself back on his pillow suddenly, saying:

"Don't Elizabeth. I should have my arms about you in a minute if you did that, and you are John's wife—and I couldn't look him in the face if I did a thing of that sort."

Elizabeth turned away without replying, her eyes full of tears. He had misunderstood her cruelly. The one thing Elizabeth Hunter was trying to do was not to show her affection for this man who was not her husband, but as she became worn and tired from duty at the sick-bed it became more and more evident that she could not accomplish it. 473

Hugh had the daily fear of her peritonitis coming back upon her; Doctor Morgan had warned him while John was away. Unable to lift his head from his pillow without assistance, Hugh saw her growing thin and discouraged, and knew that it was the enforced condition of caring for him which made her so; yet when she tried to avoid his sympathetic eyes, he instantly misunderstood her and was hurt. That she was not really strong enough to assume the care of him added to his uneasiness, and often when he was on the point of saying so, she mistook his glance and was so distant that it died on his lips. And so the days ran into each other with the pair. If for any reason one advanced, the other retreated, and at last the condition became unbearable.

Elizabeth gave much and consuming thought to the issue brought about by the fact that her husband, still living in the house with her, had no idea that she could be in love with another man, even though her husband no longer loved her. Any sort of love-making was a violation of her marriage vows, and for her to put love for another man into words was to fall to a level to which she had never in her life thought of doing.

What was she to do? John never saw anything except in the light of his own instincts and emotions, and an idea or a prejudice once fixed in his mind could be uprooted by nothing but death; therefore to confess to him and thereby make it possible to get away from Hugh would prejudice him against Hugh, whom he would be certain to think had stolen something to which he alone had the right, and against her whom he felt that he possessed, and upon whom he could wreak almost any form of public revenge. Hugh had tried to get away and John had himself held him, but John could not remember that nor listen to it if told. Every effort had been made by Hugh to avoid Elizabeth since he had found out the true situation, but nothing would convince John of that. Had John Hunter the right then, being the kind of man he was, to a confession from her that would confuse the whole issue and do vital wrong to everybody concerned, including the baby, who must suffer with the mother who would be made to seem much worse than she was. This Elizabeth Hunter asked herself daily, and with the fear that her conscience would force her to confession should she permit any demonstration of affection, and to avoid any possibility of it, she became colder and colder in her manner toward the sick man. 474

The effort to keep off dangerous ground was disastrous, for Hugh instantly misunderstood it, and the gloom which settled over him increased the difficulties with which Elizabeth had to contend. Doctor Morgan saw that his patient, who had seemed slightly better, fell back again, and he worried about his despondent condition.

"Cheer him up, Mrs. Hunter! Read to him! Anything!" he would exclaim. "He's got to have peace of mind, or there's no hope in the world of his recovery. Something more 'n staved-in ribs is keeping him down," the doctor urged, not knowing that he laid impossible burdens on shoulders too young to bear them. 475

The two duties, the one to her husband and the one to her patient, stared her in the face, and she had no one with whom to advise or consult.

"I don't care! His life's worth more than for me to approve of myself as a wife," she decided at last, and yet when she gave Hugh his next dose of medicine she was colder and more on her guard than ever.

Luther Hansen came to see Hugh that afternoon. Elizabeth received an inspiration when he started away and followed him out of the house.

“Luther, will he die?” she asked.

“I don’t know, Lizzie,” Luther said quietly, not knowing what to say to such a question, and too honest to evade.

At the time of the accident to the binder, when Elizabeth knelt, broken with exhaustion and terror, looking at the man she loved who lay under the mass of machinery with the colour of death upon him, no one but a blind man could have mistaken the utter abandonment of her grief, and certainly of all men Luther was not blind. Now he recognized the heartache back of Elizabeth’s question and with an instinct to cheer was almost persuaded to answer in the negative. In his heart he thought Hugh would die. The rapidly failing strength of the man indicated that he would do so unless something came to buoy him up. 476

“I don’t know, Lizzie,” he added, as if squaring his conscience, “he looks so weak and troubled like.”

Luther realized the moment it was out of his mouth that he had said the wrong thing. Elizabeth’s lips grew white and she held her breath a moment as if preparing to accept what she knew must be the truth.

“Lizzie,” asked Luther gently, “would you like to talk to me about it?”

The girl’s face tensed strangely and her quivering lips refused to do her bidding for a full minute, the relief was so great.

“I—I came out for that,” she said simply when she could speak. “It’s so good of you to understand and make it easy for me. I’ll walk over toward home with you.”

They walked slowly through the barnyard, across the creek, and over the pleasant pasture land. Neither spoke. Elizabeth, now that she had decided to talk to Luther about the circumstances with which she contended, could not bring herself readily to do so. Luther had always the insight of true wisdom, which let others gauge their own inclinations. When they came to the fence which was the boundary line between Luther’s and John Hunter’s farms, they stopped. There was a line of willow trees running at intervals down the fence, and Luther waved his hand in the direction of a shady spot beside them.

“Set down, Lizzie,” he said, seating himself half-facing her.

Elizabeth Hunter crumpled up on the grass with her back against a fence post, and thought 477
while Luther got out his knife and looked for something to whittle.

“Tell me about it,” he said at last. “You want to—and—and I’m a safe person.”

She looked up at him, glad that he had assumed it, and smoothed the path to confession.

“I know you’re safe, Luther. You’re more than that, God bless you!”

And to this man whom she had always trusted Elizabeth poured out all her fears, her feelings, and her frantic cry for help.

“I’ve had no one to talk to, Luther,” she ended, “and I don’t believe a human being can go on always and not put things into words.”

They talked on and on. Having started, she let him see the consuming struggle between right and wrong which she waged every day.

“Doctor Morgan says, ‘Cheer him up! Cheer him up,’ and what am I to do?” she closed in desperation.

Elizabeth Hunter had told far more than she supposed. She had bared a yearning, struggling heart to Luther’s gaze, a soul seeking a right path where there seemed no sure road, nothing but confusion.

Luther longed to help, but the problem presented insurmountable difficulties; to adopt a rigid code of morals as such was to come out at the end of the journey with something in herself and society satisfied, and Hugh Noland’s life sacrificed, as Doctor Morgan had said; to adopt a sympathetic attitude would spare the life of a useful man, but with her code shattered. If only 478
she could take John into her confidence both might be possible.

“Lizzie, you couldn’t tell Hunter, could you?” Even as he asked it he knew it could not be done.

“I would tell John instantly if he were like you, Luther,” was her reply. “I think Hugh himself would have been glad to. If he could have explained, he could have got away. No—John isn’t the kind of man. He wouldn’t understand, and he’d make it a great deal worse than it is to everybody. He’d accuse me and spoil Jack’s life, and——”

The hopelessness of it left her silent for a minute, and then Doctor Morgan’s warnings came up to be reckoned with.

“The doctor says he’ll die if he’s worried, Luther. What am I to do?” she demanded, wanting him to settle the question for her, and letting the tears run unrestrained down her cheeks.

Luther Hansen looked at her pityingly and shook his head.

“There are some things we have to settle for ourselves, Lizzie, and this is one of them for you. I do know,” he said trustfully, “whatever you do ’ll be right.”

The interview was ended. Luther helped Elizabeth to her feet, and went away to his own house and waiting chores, leaving the question with her—Elizabeth Hunter—whose life had been punctuated with interrogation points.

Elizabeth walked back slowly, going over every hint and suggestion to be gained from Luther's discussion of her situation. Nothing was clear except that whatever her decision, it must be the nearest right of anything she was able to understand. She remembered as she stopped to fasten the barnyard gate behind her that Luther had said as he left her: 479

"He'll go away as soon as he is able, you say, Lizzie," and she remembered the lingering tones of fondness in Luther's voice when Hugh's name was mentioned.

It was not easy for Luther to say, let him die, either.

Elizabeth remembered at that point that Hugh's medicine was long overdue, that medicine was more important just now than any of the questions with which she had been struggling. With a frightened little cry she ran to the house and to the sick-chamber.

"Never mind, Elizabeth," Hugh said when he saw her shuffling the papers about in search of the bottle. "Jack came in and I had Hepsie give it to me. I've decided that it isn't a good plan to have it there, and I'll keep it under my pillow hereafter."

"I—I went out with Luther, Hugh, and I didn't realize that I was gone so long. You've missed two doses!" She noticed that Hugh called her by her given name altogether now.

Hugh laughed a sad little laugh.

"Well, I've had the one for this hour at least. I—I tried to take it alone. I guess I won't try that again. It stuck in my throat and I got a strangling spell. I coughed till—well, I thought I was going to get out of taking medicine altogether. It's a terrible fear that grips a fellow when he gets something stuck in his throat and knows that he can't lift his head off his pillow. It isn't so much that he's afraid to die—it's the death struggle he's afraid of." 480

Absorbed in his own thoughts, Hugh Noland closed his eyes and did not see the effect his words produced upon Elizabeth. By some sort of psychological process he had placed that death struggle before her very eyes. Hugh, all unconscious that he had made any impression, unconscious that her attitude toward death differed from his own, or that his death could mean much more to her than deliverance from the presence and care of him, lay with his eyes closed, thinking his own bitter thoughts.

There was indeed enough in Hugh Noland's appearance to terrify the girl as he lay before her, wasted and woebegone, his low forehead blue-veined and colourless, his hands blue-veined and transparent, and all his shrunken figure sharply outlined under the thin summer covering of the bed with ghastly and suggestive significance. Instantly she wanted to go down by his side and with her arms about him give him the sympathy and comfort his lonely heart craved, but because it was so deliciously tempting she distrusted the impulse and, turning hastily, walked out of the room and out of the house, going on a run to her refuge in the willows. But though she agonized till dark she found herself no nearer a solution than before.

Hugh felt the distance Elizabeth maintained and also the fact that she was not well. How he hated it when she had to lift him for his medicine. Doctor Morgan had especially talked about her lifting when she was at first convalescing. His heart was very bad that night. 481

About three o'clock the next afternoon Elizabeth tiptoed in to see if he slept.

"I'm awake," he said without opening his eyes.

Always when Hugh did not open his eyes Elizabeth was filled with premonitions. He was very pinched and wan to-day. With a pain at her own heart, Elizabeth brought a fresh glass of water for his medicine. She had to speak to him to get him ready to take it from her hand. Kneeling, she put her arm under the pillow to raise his head while he drank.

Hugh fumbled with the little bottle as he tried to return the extra disks he had accidentally poured out into his hand. Elizabeth waited till he had the cork in place, with her arm still under the pillow. He turned his face toward her as he thrust the bottle back, and accidentally touched her hand under his head. He glanced up consciously. Her breath, fresh, warm, full of the life man adores, came to him from her parted lips, and to get away from the impulse to say things he was resolved not to say, he closed his eyes and turned his head feebly.

A gasp of fright came from the girl as she saw the contortion of his haggard face.

"Hugh!" she exclaimed.

The glass she held fell from her fingers and rolled to the foot of the bed, scattering its contents abroad unobserved, as she threw her other arm across him and lifted him for the air she supposed he needed. Their breaths mingled. Human nature is but human nature, man is but man and woman is but woman in the final analysis: they were in the hands of a fate stronger than either of them at that moment. 482

Elizabeth struggled no more; right or wrong, it had happened, and she brought her rocking chair and with her free hand clasped in his, read and took life as it came. After that, sin nor sickness could keep them from being happy. If the girl talked of the better course of restoring the old reserve, Hugh's hand would reach out imploringly:

"Only till I get well, dearest; I won't trouble your conscience after that. I know you don't feel right about this, but I can't go back to a life without any affection again while I'm here," and Elizabeth always responded to that call. She reflected that even Luther could not condemn her for it.

Yet when John was in the house or whenever she was obliged to be careful about Hepsie, as she

often was, she was outraged in her own sight, and her colours trailed in the dust of humiliation, for she saw that the path she was treading was one of unaccustomed duplicity.

“If I could only approve of myself,” she said to Hugh, and then was sorry she had spoken, for Hugh Noland’s face grew more white and he closed his eyes with a little sob.

“Oh, my darling,” he said when he could speak again, “you long for that and I like you for it too, but I’m weak. I want to be loved and petted, and—I’m so tired that I don’t want to think about it at all. Kiss me, sweet,” and Elizabeth kissed him, and was glad in spite of herself.

“You shall not have to think till you’re well,” she promised, and the days ran on throughout the blazing summer, and Hugh improved, and Elizabeth won Doctor Morgan’s admiration as a nurse.

In the midst of the deceptions which Elizabeth Hunter was called upon to practise, however, she followed the natural trend of her character in ways which proved how fundamental truth and outrightness were in her make-up. Having discussed Hugh with Luther, she told Hugh that she had done so. This gave Hugh a wrong impression of affairs between the two which she was obliged to set right.

“No, Luther never loved me—that is, he never said that he did. That isn’t the way we feel about each other. We’ve just been good friends always. We herded cattle together and told each other things all our lives. I could tell Luther anything.”

“Well, he couldn’t love that black-eyed thing he lives with,” Hugh said.

“I don’t know how it is myself, but he does, and Luther never lies. You can see that he’s square with her. He gives her a kind of companionship that will keep her out of the position I’m in, too,” she said with conviction, and then saw the kind of blow that she had dealt, and covered her face with her hands for shame.

Elizabeth heard the invalid sigh deeply. When she could speak again, she slid down on her knees by his bed and, laying her arm across the shoulders of the man she had hurt, faced herself and her deeds squarely, as was her way.

“It’s of no use, Hugh. We’ve got to face it. I didn’t intend to hurt you, but I’m in a serious position. I must think of this thing all my life—and I shall shrink whenever I do. I shall see everybody in the light of my own life. I made no comparison between you and Luther. There’s love and love in this world, as I’ve found out. John thought he loved me and I thought I loved him—and look at us! I don’t know what Luther would do if he were placed where we are, but that is not the question. I hurt you just now; but, oh, Hugh! I love you too—God help me, and in the midst of it all I want my self-respect back till I could almost die to get it. Sometimes I think I’ll go and tell John yet.”

When for sheer want of breath Elizabeth stopped and looked at Hugh Noland inquiringly, he asked eagerly:

“Could we?”

And for a long time she looked at him, till her eyes took on a faraway look which said that she was going over details and experiences of the past. In the light of those experiences she finally shook her head.

“No,” she said with simple conviction. “You don’t know John. He’d never understand that—— Well, he’d mix everything uselessly. It would fall hardest on Jack; his future would be spoiled by the humiliation of having everybody think I was worse than I——”

Elizabeth could not finish her sentence for the pain on the face before her, and hid her face on the same pillow and cried out her grief and heartache till Hugh had to warn her that Hepsie might come in.

It was well that Elizabeth’s mind was occupied with Hepsie while she bathed and cooled her swollen eyelids. Long afterward she remembered Hugh had laid his arm across his white face at that moment, but she was never to know the fulness of the self-reproach nor the depths of the despair which Hugh Noland suffered—Hugh, who loved her. For himself, he did not so much care, being a man and accustomed to the life of men in those things, but he saw the endless round of her days, carrying with her through them all the secrecy and shame of it; she who loved openness! If she had been a woman who looked herself less squarely in the face it would have been less hard.

“I think I’ll talk to Luther too,” he said at last. “You couldn’t drive Patsie over for him this evening, could you?” he asked.

Elizabeth looked down at him in surprise as she wiped her hands.

“Why—why, I thought you knew about Patsie,” she said hesitatingly. “Patsie’s dead.”

“Dead?”

“Yes. She died the night you were hurt. John drove her for Doctor Morgan,” the girl said, wishing that she could keep the news from him.

After that first startled exclamation Hugh did not remark on the mare’s death; he noticed that Elizabeth never blamed John for things when talking of him, and he liked her for it.

“What became of the horses that day—the ones on the binder? You kept me so stupefied at first that I sort of forgot about them.”

He forced from her all the vital details of the purchase of the new horses. After he had received the answers she felt obliged to give he did not comment upon any feature of the story. They never criticised anything John did between them; in fact, they rarely mentioned his name, but Hugh was struck with the necessity of knowing methods and facts regarding the business and asking such simple questions as he was warranted in asking. When the discussion was finished he asked again for Luther, and she promised to get him as soon as possible.

Hugh Noland had a long afternoon to think out the situation into which he had thrust Elizabeth, for when Elizabeth arrived at Luther's house he had gone to town and the sun was so hot that she rested before starting home. Hugh was only disturbed by Hepsie, who came once an hour to give him the drink necessary when medicine time came around. It was lonesome with Elizabeth away, but it let him think more clearly. Hugh saw that he had entangled Elizabeth in a life which contained something altogether extraneous to her whole character. Because she was perfectly open, the greater would be the damage which must result to her if this life went on. One wild moment of hope had been granted him when they had discussed the possibility of telling John. How well Hugh remembered the searching thought Elizabeth had given his question before she had shaken her head. The time taken to think soberly of confession told more plainly than all 487
her words how much she desired it. The one thing in life which Elizabeth most disliked was duplicity, and yet so long as he remained an invalid their relations would be kept up. For this alone he would have been glad to crawl on his knees to Colebyville, though he died on the way. Something must be done to free the girl and put her back into a life of which she could approve. With self-respect restored, Elizabeth was the kind of woman who would take hold of the merely unpleasant features of her life, and in time find a way of overcoming them. A plan began to formulate in Hugh Noland's head.

The next morning Hepsie came and asked for a few days off to get some needed sewing done. With Hugh's illness and the extra work of it she had let her own work drag till she felt that she could neglect it no longer. Elizabeth let her go, thinking guiltily that there would be less danger of the discovery she seemed to be ever fearing these days. How they had gone so long without it she could not understand. To get her dinner dishes out of the way early she put Jack to sleep immediately after they were through eating and then hurried the dishes so as to get in a long afternoon's reading. The dishes took a long time in spite of her efforts to hurry. When at last she did finish she hastened to the bedroom with a glass of water in her hand. Hugh had been thinking seriously and was worn out with the tangle of wrongdoing in which he found himself, the solution of which involved such unsatisfactory changes, and now just weakly wanted to be 488
loved. He did not speak, but after the tablet was swallowed invited a kiss by a glance of the eye, and when it was given, drew her head down on his breast and lay patting it.

Jack had wakened and toddled into the room on his sleepy little legs. The child staggered over to his mother and laid his head against her arm, murmuring sleepily:

"Love oo too!"

Elizabeth Hunter sprang to her feet as if a clap of thunder had unexpectedly sent its report through the hot afternoon air. Her guilty eyes sought Hugh's. Jack encircled her knees with his fat little arms and, standing on his tiptoes to be taken, repeated:

"Love oo too!"

There was a noise at the well and Elizabeth, glad of a chance to escape from the room, went out. John was pumping water over a jug to cool it before he filled it. The sight of the man who was her husband had a curious effect on Elizabeth; everything in her, mentally and physically, became chaotic, her ears buzzed, her temples throbbed, and there was an inner shrinking which could scarcely be controlled. John had seen her and waited for her to come out to the well.

When the jug was full, John leaned forward to kiss Jack and a sick sort of fear took hold of her lest he would offer to kiss her also. His breath fell hot on her neck as he sought Jack's face on her shoulder, but he did not offer to kiss her, and she turned away with an unspeakable relief.

"Take Jack and I'll carry the jug out to the boys while you have a chat with Hugh," Elizabeth 489
said suddenly.

John was very tired, the field where they had been cutting shock corn was very hot, and the house looked cool and inviting.

"Well, I guess I will."

The jug was heavier than Elizabeth had thought and she sat down to rest on the way, observing as she did so that Doctor Morgan was driving into the lane.

"I am not absolved from blame because he scolds," she told herself.

As she thought of her duties in life, Jack's affectionate little speech of half an hour ago came to mind. Aye! there was the crux of the whole difficulty. She was Jack's mother! A line of Emerson's which she had read with Hugh once came to her mind: "In my dealings with my child, my Latin and my Greek, my accomplishments and my money, stead me nothing. They are all lost upon him: but as much soul as I have avails." Her whole mind was taken up with the quotation as soon as it came before her.

"As much soul as I have avails!" Over and over she repeated it, and when she at last saw John bearing down upon her she got up guiltily and waited instead of going on with the jug alone.

"Was it too heavy?" he asked. "I'll take it over and come back for you. Doctor Morgan wants to see you. I'll come back; it's too hot for me; I'm going to rest."

The cool house had appealed to John Hunter.

At the house Hugh Noland was asking searching questions of the old doctor.

“When do you intend to let me get out of here, Doctor?” he asked.

“Out of here?” the doctor exclaimed. “Not till you’re well enough. Just what do you mean by ‘out of here?’” he asked in return.

“Just what I said. When will I be well enough to go to Mitchell County?”

There was an intensity about it which caught the doctor’s attention.

“Now look here, Noland, you won’t go to Mitchell County for a year with such a heart as that—it’s too far from your friends, my boy. Be good and don’t you get to worrying. You’ve got to stand it. Be a man.”

Had Doctor Morgan shown any tenderness Hugh Noland would have told him the real reason for wanting to get away, but something in the banter of being admonished to be a man took away the thing which made it possible.

“Then can’t I be taken into town?” Hugh asked when he had had time to swallow the bitter pill.

“Into town? Now? Well, not that anybody knows of at this time. Now look here, you’ve got a splendid place to stay; why can’t you be sensible and lay here and get well? You worry till I might as well go and turn this medicine down the gullet of one of Hunter’s pigs. Be a man,” he repeated, hoping to whip the discouraged patient into line with good sense.

“It isn’t a case of being a man, when a woman’s got to take care of you that had better be taking care of herself,” Hugh said bitterly.

“Is Mrs. Hunter getting down on our hands too? That won’t do. I’m glad we sent for her.”

Hugh Noland knew that he had played his last card, and he knew that he had lost. Elizabeth walked in at that moment, followed by John. Doctor Morgan addressed himself to her, taking her aside while they talked.

“All moonshine, Noland, old boy,” he exclaimed when he followed Elizabeth back to the sickroom a few minutes later. “This girl’s as sound as a dollar. Noland’s been thinking he’s too much trouble, Mrs. Hunter.”

Doctor Morgan saw Hugh Noland’s colour die out, and dropped his finger on the patient’s wrist apprehensively. Neither spoke. To change the subject, and also to get a chance to observe the sick man under less conscious circumstances, Doctor Morgan addressed John:

“By the way, Hunter, that man you bought the team of got in a pinch and asked me to shave the note for him. It’s all right, is it?”

A sort of electric thrill ran from each to all in the room. Doctor Morgan understood that he had unwittingly opened Pandora’s box; Hugh gave no sign, but though John answered promptly and positively in the one word, “Surely,” a warning was somehow conveyed to John that this was more than a merely unfortunate moment. He had been uncomfortable about the note, and under ordinary circumstances would have been glad to have the first knowledge of it come to Hugh in the presence of a third party, but now, by some indefinable thing which was neither sight nor sound, he knew that the news was not news to Hugh, and by the same intangible, vague thing, by some prophetic premonition, John knew that this matter of the note was a disaster.

There was a long pause, finally broken by Hugh.

“Will you be going home by Hansen’s to-night, Doctor?”

“I can as well as any other way,” the doctor said, glad to hear voices again.

“Will you ask Hansen to come over in the morning, then?” Hugh asked.

Both Doctor Morgan and John Hunter looked over at Hugh sharply, wondering what he could want of Luther, but the sick man closed his eyes as a way of ending the argument. Doctor Morgan dropped his finger on the patient’s wrist again and looked at John warningly:

“I think I’ll be going. You stay with Noland, Hunter. I want a word with Mrs. Hunter before I go. I’ll stop at Hansen’s, Noland.”

Doctor Morgan took Elizabeth out and questioned her closely about the diet and other important matters, but was able to elicit nothing new.

“I’ve been encouraged of late,” the old doctor said, shaking his head, “but here he is as bad as ever—that is, as discouraged and restless. Have you been reading to him lately? What’s on his nerves, anyhow?”

When the doctor could get no additional information regarding Hugh’s condition from Elizabeth, he gave it up and turned his attention to the girl herself.

“I told him you were as fine as a dollar, but I’m not sure about you. I’m going to bring you a tonic to-morrow. I’ll be out in the morning, early, and I’ll try and see him to-morrow night late. I don’t like the way he looked to-night. Say, you don’t know what he wants of Hansen do you?”

“No. He asked me to go over yesterday afternoon after him, but Luther wasn’t there and hasn’t come in since. It’s a busy time and he probably thought very little of it. Hugh often sends for him. Do you think he’s worse, Doctor?” she asked anxiously.

“No, not specially,” the old doctor answered gruffly, as he turned toward Luther Hansen’s

house. He was a bit annoyed because he thought Hugh showed too little backbone, as he termed it.

John Hunter sat long beside the invalid, cut to the quick by the languid air and shrunken frame. He wanted to talk about the note now that it was not a secret, but Hugh lay absolutely silent and did not open his eyes until the lamp was brought in. At that he shifted uneasily and asked that it be kept in the other room till needed at medicine time. John finally gave it up and went softly out, convinced that Hugh wanted rest and quiet. John was broken in many ways by the continued illness for which he felt himself responsible, and had particularly wanted a chance to talk to-night.

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When all had gone to bed but Elizabeth, Hugh called her to him.

Elizabeth answered the call, but stood at a distance from the bed. It had come. Hugh had always known it would, but now that it was here it was hard to face.

“You mean it, I know you do, Elizabeth,” he said. “I want you to do it, but—O God! how hard it’s going to be!”

He held out his empty arms to her for a last embrace.

Elizabeth shook her head.

“Now’s the time to begin, Hugh. ‘Too,’ Jack says. That tells the whole story. I shall pollute his life also. I shall stand, not for what I think I am, but for what I am, in that child’s sight. I reasoned it out when you were so ill, and I thought this was justifiable, and oh, Hugh! I’ve dragged myself down in my own sight and I’ve dragged you down with me. It isn’t enough for me to seem to be right, I’ve got to *be* right,” she said in a low tone, and with added shame because she had to keep her voice from John’s ears—John who slept upstairs and trusted them.

“It would be easier for you, Elizabeth, if I were not here,” Hugh Noland said sadly. “You could kill it out alone.”

“But I am not alone. You are here, and have got to help me. Tell me that you will—at any cost,” she leaned forward, and in her eagerness raised her voice till he pointed upward warningly.

When she had given his medicine without a touch of tenderness, he said to her:

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“You have bid my soul forth. I will give you that help, at any cost.”

He made the last sentence stand out, but in her earnestness she did not notice it or think of it again till it was significant. She went back to her bed on the sitting-room couch and to the broken rest allowed to those who watch with the sick.

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CHAPTER XXIII

“AT ANY COST”

The old doctor delivered the message to Luther, and the next morning he appeared at the sickroom door.

While he was talking to Hugh, Nathan Hornby came and was called into the sickroom also. Elizabeth was too busy with her own work to think much about this visit, and before it was finished Doctor Morgan was with her questioning her about the night spent by her patient.

Nathan came to the kitchen while they were talking.

“I think I’ll take that youngster home with me if you’re goin’ t’ be alone t’ day,” he announced.

Doctor Morgan looked relieved.

“That’s about the kindest thing you could do for this girl,” he said. “Noland isn’t as well as I’d like to have him, and she’s up every hour in the night. It takes a hired girl to run off at a time like this.”

Elizabeth defended Hepsie at once. “Hepsie’s pure gold. She waited a long time for Hugh to get well. Please, Doctor, don’t make any such remark as that outside of this house or some one ’ll tell her I said it. Really, she’s the best help a woman ever had. She’ll come back the first of next week. She said she’d come back any day I’d send for her. She’d do anything for me.”

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“I guess you’re right, little woman,” Doctor Morgan laughed. “I wish all the same that you had some one with you so that you could stay right with that boy.”

All through the forenoon Elizabeth kept out of the sickroom except when the medicine was due, and then got away as fast as she could, though it was not easy to do so, for Doctor Morgan had urged her to entertain the invalid and keep him cheered up, letting her see that he was more than usually worried. She meant to live up to her resolutions, but in the afternoon Hugh was so quiet that it seemed ominous and began to worry her.

“Oh, Hugh! how can I do right if you take it this way?” she cried in despair, and would have

stroked his hair if he had not shrunk from her hand.

“Don’t, Elizabeth. You have asked for help. I have to give it in my own way. I have done harm enough to your life. Make it as easy for me as you can, for I’m only a man and—well, I’ve promised to help you—*at any cost*. You’ve nothing to worry about. I’m no worse than I’ve been,” he ended in a whisper, and closed his eyes, as was his way when he did not want to talk.

The girl tiptoed out, and left him to his thoughts. Her own were anything but satisfactory. He was more wan and tragic than ever before, and Doctor Morgan had especially cautioned her. She worked in the kitchen most of the evening, keeping out of his presence, and so the long, hard, unsatisfactory day passed, was recorded in the annals of time, and forever gone from the opportunity to alter or change its record.

Luther Hansen came in after dark. Elizabeth answered his knock.

“Alone?” he asked in astonishment when he entered the sitting room.

“Yes. Mr. Chamberlain wanted John to bring the men over and load hogs for him. It’s been too hot to take them to town in the daytime. Hugh’s asleep, I think,” she said in a low tone. “I didn’t take a light in, because he likes to be in the dark, but I spoke to him two or three times and he didn’t answer. Are you in a hurry? I hate to waken him.”

Doctor Morgan came as they talked. He stopped to look Elizabeth over before going to the sickroom, and then took the lamp she handed him and, followed by Luther, left Elizabeth standing in the dining room. She heard the doctor’s sharp order, “Take this light, Hansen,” and ran to help.

The horror, the anguish, the regret of that hour are best left untold. The number of disks gone from the bottle under the pillow gave the doctor his clue. One final effort must have been made by the desperate invalid to secure for himself the drink which would wash them down without the dreaded coughing spell.

The old doctor, who loved them both, and Luther Hansen also, witnessed Elizabeth’s despair, and listened to her story. As Luther had said a few weeks before, he was a safe person, and her secret remained a secret. Luther led her away into the night and sat silently by while her grief spent itself in tears; it was a necessary stage. When John and the men came, he led her back, and himself met them at the gate to explain.

The morning and the evening were the first day; the comings and goings of the inquisitive and the sympathetic were alike unremarked by Elizabeth. Only for that first hour did her grief run to tears; it was beyond tears. At the coroner’s inquest she answered penetrating questions as if they related to the affairs of others, and when at last the weary body, whose spirit had been strong enough to lay it aside, had been buried on the bare hillside, the neighbours and those who came to the funeral from curiosity agreed that Elizabeth Hunter could stand anything. So little evidence of emotion had she given that Mrs. Crane remarked to Mrs. Farnshaw as they rode home together:

“I declare, Lizzie’s th’ coolest hand I ever met. She couldn’t ’a’ liked Mr. Noland very much. She wasn’t near as broke up as Mr. Hunter was, an’ when I asked her if she wouldn’t feel kind of spooky in that house after such a thing, she just looked at me, funny-like, an’ says ‘Why?’ an’ didn’t seem t’ care a bit.”

Doctor Morgan drove home from the graveyard with the family.

“I suppose you know, Hunter, that there’s a will,” he said before he helped Elizabeth into the buggy.

“No! Who’s got it?” John exclaimed.

“He gave it to me, with a note asking me not to read it till after he was buried, if he should die.”

John and Elizabeth followed the doctor’s rig home across the long stretch of prairie.

“Did you know that Hugh left a will?” John Hunter asked Elizabeth, after driving a long time in silence.

“Luther told me last night. I didn’t think much about it and I forgot to tell you,” Elizabeth returned briefly, and fell back into her own sad thoughts again.

John Hunter looked at his wife in surprise.

“Luther!” he exclaimed.

“Yes,” she answered indifferently, not looking up, and unaware that John was regarding her with a surprise which amounted almost to suspicion.

John let the subject drop, but as they rode home he had an uncomfortable sense of unpleasant things to come: first of all why had the presence of the will been concealed from him, Hugh Noland’s partner and closest friend? secondly, why had Luther Hansen been told? thirdly, why had Elizabeth declined just now to discuss it with him after knowing about it for some time? He could not put his finger on the exact trouble, but John Hunter was affronted.

The truth of the matter was that Elizabeth had only heard of the will the night before, and had been too stunned by other things to care much about it. If she had thought about it at all she would have supposed that John had been told also, but Elizabeth had been occupied with troubles quite aside from material things, and now did not talk because she was concerned with certain sad aspects of the past and almost as sad forebodings for the future.

“You better come in too, Hansen,” Doctor Morgan said to Luther, when they arrived at the Hunter house.

Sadie had stayed with Hepsie at the house, and Luther had expected to take her and go straight home. The two women had been busy in the three hours since the body of Hugh Noland had been taken from the house. The mattress which had been put out in the hot sun for two days had been brought in, and order had been restored to the death chamber. There was a dinner ready for the party of sorrowing friends who had loved the man that had been laid to his final rest, and it was not till after it was eaten that the subject of the will was mentioned again.

They sat about the table and listened to Doctor Morgan’s remarks and the reading of the important document.

“I have,” Doctor Morgan began, “a letter from Mr. Noland written the day before his death, in which he tells me that he has made a will of which I am to be made the sole executor. In that letter he enclosed another sealed one on which he had written instructions that it was not to be opened till after his death. I opened the latter this morning, and in it he states frankly that he has decided to voluntarily leave his slowly dissolving body, and spare further pain to those he loves. Perhaps—perhaps I could have helped him, if I’d known. I can’t tell,” the old doctor said brokenly. “He asked me to do something for him that I guess I ought to have done, but I thought he was all right as he was, and I wouldn’t do it. However, he asked me as his executor to see to it that every provision of this will, which I have never seen, be carried out to the letter. Hansen, here, is one of the witnesses he tells me, and Hornby is the other. It is unnecessary for me to say that I shall have to carry out these instructions as I have been commanded to do.” 502

Turning to John, he added:

“I hope, Hunter, that there’s nothing in this that will work any inconvenience to you, and I hardly think it will.”

John Hunter sat through the opening of the envelope and the rapid survey which Doctor Morgan gave its contents before he began to read, stirred by varying emotions. Suspicion crawled through his brain, leaving her slimy trail; why had there been need of secrecy? Why had all these people been told, and he, John Hunter alone, left out? Nathan Hornby and Luther Hansen witnesses! But most of all, as was to be expected, his suspicions were directed toward Elizabeth. She had known—she probably knew from the beginning. She was in the conspiracy. Of the fact of a conspiracy John Hunter felt certain when Doctor Morgan cleared his throat and began to read:

Hunter’s Farm,
Colebyville, Kansas,
August 22, 18—

Know all men by these presents that I, Hugh Noland, being of sound mind and memory, not acting under duress, menace, fraud, or undue influence of any person whatsoever, do make, publish, and declare this my last will and testament.

First, I order and direct that all my just debts be paid by my executor, hereinafter named.

Second, I expressly provide, order, and direct that all my estate, consisting of one half of the lands and chattels of the firm of “Hunter and Noland” shall be settled by my executor, hereinafter named, without the intervention of the courts, and given, whole and entire, to Elizabeth Hunter, and to her heirs and assigns forever, and that the division be a legal division, so arranged that all deeds to the land and all rights to the personal property shall be legally hers. 503

This I do as an inadequate return for all she has done and tried to do for me.

Lastly, I hereby nominate and appoint George W. Morgan, M. D., sole executor of this my last will and testament, to serve without bonds or the intervention of any court.

In testimony whereof I hereunto set my hand and seal, and publish and declare this my last will and testament, on this twenty-second day of August, in the year of our Lord 18——

Signed, Hugh Noland.

Witnesses: Luther Hansen, Nathan Hornby.

There was a pause. Surprise held every person present, for the witnesses had seen only their signatures up to now, not the will, and Doctor Morgan was no less astonished than the rest. At last he reached his hand across the table to Elizabeth saying:

“It’s an instrument that I shall get some pleasure at least from administering, Mrs. Hunter. You deserve it. I’m glad it goes to you. It’s like the boy! God rest his weary soul, and forgive his impatience to be off! we’ll miss him,” he added brokenly.

Elizabeth sat with her hands clasped on the table in front of her, neither hearing nor seeing more. She was unaware that she was the object of everybody’s attention and that all eyes were turned on her. The merely material items contained in that instrument were of little moment to her just then; to every one else, except perhaps Luther, they were all that there was of importance. Sadie Hansen looked at her young neighbour, overcome by the fact that she was to have several thousand dollars all her own; Luther’s gray eyes dwelt upon her affectionately, glad that this last evidence of Hugh Noland’s sacrifice was hers; Doctor Morgan thought of the

power it would give her to control the financial side of her life, and John Hunter was glad that at least the money was to remain in the business, and ready to forget the supposed plot.

Elizabeth was aroused by Doctor Morgan placing a sealed envelope in her hand and saying:

"This seems to be for you, Mrs. Hunter. It was in this big envelope with the will, and I didn't see it till just now."

The girl was so surprised that she turned the envelope over two or three times and read her name carefully to realize that the letter was for her, and from Hugh's own hand. When at last it was clear to her, her face flushed with confusion, and the first tears which had dimmed her eyes since the hour of his death came to her relief. But the tears did not fall. Realizing that the eyes of all present were upon her, she controlled herself, and rising said:

"Excuse me one moment, till I have read it," and passed into her own bedroom, where, with the sense of his presence, she clasped it to her tenderly an instant, and still standing, broke the seal.

It was simple, sincere, and so formal that all the world might have read it, and yet, it said all that she would have wanted him to say.

> My Dear Elizabeth [it began]: When this reaches your hand, my heart will have ceased to trouble either of us. I will have fought my little fight; I will have kept the faith—which I started out too late to keep. The little I leave you will be small recompense for all I have cost you, but it is all I have, and will, I hope, help toward emancipating you from care. My one earnest bit of advice to you is, *keep it free from debts*.
>
> I wish I might have spared you these last few days and their various burdens, but I am sure they will be less heavy than if I chose to wait.
>
> Hugh.

Elizabeth Hunter returned to the table with the open letter, which she handed to Doctor Morgan saying:

"Read it aloud, Doctor," and stood behind her chair with her head bowed while it was being done.

When it was finished, she looked about her, measuring the different members of the group, wondering if it said the things to them which it cried aloud to her. The survey was satisfactory, till she suddenly realized that John was not there.

"Where's John," she asked.

"Gone out to see Nate Hornby—he's brought the baby," Luther answered.

Doctor Morgan started for home, taking the will with him to have it legally probated, and Elizabeth took Jack from his father's arms, and went back to put away her letter, forgetting that John had not heard it read. Nathan came to spend the rest of the day. He knew from personal experience the cheerlessness of the house which has but lately harboured the dead.

CHAPTER XXIV

FACING CONSEQUENCES

The next Sunday John was thrown in upon Elizabeth for entertainment. He had been a little more tender with her since the funeral, reflecting that women were easily upset by death and that this death had been particularly tragic in its sadness and disturbing features. He missed Hugh, and an intangible something about the will made him uncomfortable; but they would be rich in time and he could simply oversee the business, and life would be more satisfactory. If he thought of Luther and Nathan as witnesses, the thought was made partially acceptable since they could see that Hugh had placed the property in his, John Hunter's, hands. When the uncomfortable things wormed their way forward and would be considered, he tried to reason them out. Some features of it could be accounted for; for instance, he, John Hunter, had probably not been consulted by Hugh for legal reasons, since the money was to come to them. Hugh must have considered that. But Elizabeth had known! He had forgotten that. Right there John went into a brown study. Had she known before Hugh's death? It was queer, but she never mentioned Hugh these days, nor the will, nor—no, she did not speak of the letter, much less offer to show it to him. Still, the money was theirs. That was the solid rock under John Hunter's feet. Whatever else happened, the money was theirs. Now he could open out and farm on a scale befitting a man of his parts. They would make something yet. This farming venture had not turned out so badly after all.

A slight rain was falling, the first in two months, two of the most important months in the year; but it was only a drizzle and not enough to benefit the corn, which—even the last planting—was ruined. The heat and drought had forced a premature ripening, and the stubby ears, fully

formed, were empty of developing grains, except near the butts. It was discouraging to lose the corn, and John, to take the place of the shortened crop, had had a field plowed and sewed to millet. A promise of rain meant a probable crop of that substitute for the heavier grain, but it must be rain, not a mere shower. Disappointed at the stingy display of water, John wandered about the house, disturbed by Jack's noise, and irritably uncomfortable.

"Come on in and sit down," he urged when he saw that Elizabeth intended to help Hepsie with the dishes.

"All right. Let the work go, Hepsie, and I'll do it later," Elizabeth said quietly. She dreaded an hour with John when he was in that mood, but there seemed to be no help for it.

The two women cleared the dinner table and righted the dining room before they stopped, then Elizabeth closed the kitchen door and left the dishwashing till she could get away from the conference requested. Hepsie had hurried to get started early for her home and Elizabeth had entered into her plans and offered assistance.

"Why don't you let Hepsie finish them alone?" John said petulantly.

Elizabeth made no reply, but took Jack on her lap and rocked him to keep herself occupied. There was less opportunity for disagreement if the child were still while his father talked.

"If this rain'd only get busy we'd have a crop of millet yet," John began. "Corn's going to be mighty high and scarce this fall."

Elizabeth did not reply; something in the air warned her to let John do the talking. She had ceased to enter into conversation with him unless something vital made it necessary to speak. The vital thing was not long in forthcoming. The whimsical weather made him depressed and kept his mind on the gloomy crop outlook.

"Confound this beastly drizzle! If it'd only get down to business and rain we'd pull out yet. There'll be corn to buy for the cattle and the very devil to pay everywhere. I've got to lengthen out the sheds over those feeders—it hurried the cattle to get around them last winter—and here's all these extra expenses lately. There's no way out of it—we've got to put a mortgage on that west eighty. I'll take up the horse note in that case, and Johnson's offering that quarter section so cheap that I think I'll just make the loan big enough to cover the first payment and take it in. We'll never get it as cheap again."

Elizabeth's eyes were wide open now, but she considered a moment before she began to speak.

"We can't do that," she said slowly at last. "We're out of debt, except your personal note for the five hundred and the one for the team. It won't do to mortgage again."

"But we'll have to mortgage, with the crop short, and all those cattle!" he exclaimed.

"Sell a part of them as grass cattle, and use the money to buy corn for the rest," she advised.

"Grass cattle are soft and don't weigh down like corn-fed steers. It would be sheer waste," John insisted.

Elizabeth understood that right now they were to test their strength. She thought it over carefully, not speaking till she had decided what to say. The old path of mortgages and interest meant the old agony of dread of pay-day and the heart eaten out of every day of their existence, and yet she was careful not to rush into discussion. Her voice became more quiet as she felt her way in the debate.

"You are right as far as you go, grass cattle do not sell for as much, but, on the other hand, a loan means interest, and there is always a chance of the loss of a steer or two and then the profit is gone and you have your mortgage left. Luther said yesterday that they had black-leg over north of home, and you know how contagious it is."

"Oh, Luther! Of course Luther knows all there is to know about anything," sneered her husband, to whom Luther was a sore point just now.

Elizabeth realized her mistake in mentioning Luther's name to John almost before it was out of her mouth. John's instincts made him bluster and get off the subject of business and on to that of personalities at once. She did not reply to the taunt, but went quietly back to the point of business.

"The price of corn," she said with perfect control, "will go way up after this dry weather, but the price of beef doesn't always rise in proportion. Besides that, this is a bad year to get tied up in the money market."

"We're going to have to do it all the same," John replied, spurred on by the mention of Luther's name to compel her consent.

"But, we can't do it. Hugh especially directed in his letter that we must not go into debt."

"I have not had the honour of seeing Hugh's letter to you, and therefore I do not know," John returned. That was another sore point.

"So you didn't! Doctor Morgan read it to all the rest."

Elizabeth had forgotten that John had not heard the letter read, and rose promptly and went for it. She laid it on the table at his elbow when she returned saying:

"I had forgotten—you didn't hear it when the doctor read it that day."

John Hunter brushed it aside with his arm.

“I don’t wish to see it, thank you.” 511

The letter fell on the floor. Elizabeth stooped quickly and picked it up.

“You may do as you wish about that; I shall not consent to the mortgage just the same,” she said, her temper getting the better of her at last. She turned to the bedroom to put the letter away.

“Now look here, Elizabeth!” John called after her.

Seeing the ineffectiveness of carrying on the conversation when they were not face to face, John waited till she returned. When she was seated again and had begun to rock the restless child once more, he began:

“We may as well understand each other right now as any time. If you’re going to run this place, I want to know it, and I’ll step down and out.”

John looked belligerent and waited for her to do her womanly duty and give in. Elizabeth made no reply. John waited. He continued to wait for some seconds.

“I shall not consent to a mortgage,” was the quiet answer.

John Hunter flung himself out of the house.

It was a bad afternoon for John. The drizzle had hardly been enough to lay the dust, but had made it impossible to walk through the grass or over the fields; his pride made it impossible for him to go back to the house, and so there was no place open to him except the hayloft, where he turned his own gloomy thoughts over and reasoned out this new development. A day’s pouting, he was certain, would win his point; it would probably be all right when he went back at supper time, but he saw difficulties ahead with Elizabeth feeling that she had a right to an opinion 512 regarding the property.

“I shall let her see that I mean business all the same. I’m not going to have her interfering in my work. Let her attend to her own, as a woman ought to do,” he concluded.

He did wish, however, that he had read the letter. Doctor Morgan had referred to the letter also as being authority. He had an uncomfortable feeling that if he ever saw that letter that he would have to ask again; Elizabeth was a little less easy of late to manage than she had been that first year; she could put a thing aside and not discuss it almost as well as he could.

At that point John’s mind flamed up against Luther Hansen. Elizabeth was always quoting Luther. He was glad he had let her see just now that she need not quote that common Swede to him any more. He didn’t know a necktie from a shoelace! Hugh might have asked him to witness the will, but Hugh had seen fit to leave the money to them, all the same. Whatever else hurt, the money was his, and he’d turn everything into cattle, and get rich, and get out of this damned hole.

Elizabeth, in the house, was doing her own thinking. The conversation just finished had indications. She saw that her husband had a definite policy in regard to the management of the property, that he did not mean to let her have any more to do with it than when it was all his own. A creeping suspicion came to her that if she refused to consent to further mortgages her husband might leave her. There had been a violence in his tones as well as in his manner 513 beyond any he had ever assumed toward her. Elizabeth shrank in a heartsick way from the contest. If he would mortgage the one eighty and then stop she would far rather have given away that much land than to have the quarrel, but that she knew he would not do. She could not for a moment think of giving up if she expected to have a roof over her head that was unencumbered when she was old. Though half the property was now hers by actual right, she would not interfere with anything he wished to do with it except to place a loan against it. If he insisted upon mortgages, though their disagreement became a scandal, she resolved that she would not consent.

John ate his supper without speaking to any one, and waited from then till bedtime for his answer, but Elizabeth gave no sign. The next day he waited, and the next, with increasing uneasiness and alarm. He decided at last to force her consent.

The third day he put one of the new horses in the single buggy and left the place without saying where he was going, and not even when he returned in the evening did he mention what his errand had been.

The following morning a team was driven into the side lane and Elizabeth saw John meet the driver and help him tie his horses. There was the air of a prearranged thing between them, and as they came toward the house it flashed through her mind what had been done. Her whole 514 form straightened instinctively and she grasped her broom rigidly as she left the dining room and went to her own bedroom to get control of herself before she should have to meet the stranger. She realized that the man was the Johnson John had spoken of as having the quarter section of land for sale. She was to be called upon to act. The thing she must do she knew was right; could she make the manner of the doing of it right also? She would not humiliate him if she could help it; she stayed in her room, hoping that he would come to call her himself and then she could warn him when he was alone, but John would not meet her except in the presence of the stranger, and sent Hepsie to call her. There was no help for it, and Elizabeth went as she was bidden—went quietly, and was introduced to the neighbour whom she had never seen.

“Mr. Johnson has accepted my proposition, Elizabeth, to give him twenty-five dollars an acre for the quarter next to ours,” John said after all were seated.

The girl waited quietly. She noticed that John did not mention the terms of payment, and waited for him to commit himself on that point.

“Do you know where those blank deeds are? We can make one out while we conclude the details, and then go in to Colebyville to-morrow and have a notary take our signatures,” John concluded easily.

Elizabeth hesitated visibly, and John had a startled moment, but she went for the blanks at last, as he directed. The two men sat with their heads together, and wrote carefully in the numbers and legal description of the land.

“And the party of the first part further agrees that the sum of——” John was reading as he wrote it in. His voice ran on to the close. When the writing was finished the man Johnson rose, and, picking up his straw hat, said:

“I guess I’ll be hurrying on toward home now. I’ll stop in on the way to-morrow morning. You’d just as well ride with me.”

“Oh, I’ll have to take Mrs. Hunter in with me,” John replied, “and I can just as well hitch up to my own rig.”

“What are you taking me in with you for, John?” Elizabeth asked, perfectly quiet on the outside, but aquiver with humiliation and dread because of the thing she was being compelled to do.

“To fix up the papers on the west eighty; you know It’ll be necessary for you to sign them too.” Addressing Mr. Johnson, he added easily: “My wife objects to going into debt, Mr. Johnson, but I felt this too good an opportunity to let pass, and since we can arrange it so that I won’t have to raise but a thousand dollars just now, I’m sure She’ll see the advisability of the move.”

Elizabeth considered a second before she began to speak, and then said slowly:

“Mr. Hunter does not understand the nature of my objection, I see. Of course if he can arrange it with you so that all the indebtedness falls on the land he is buying, I should have no objections whatever, but we cannot mortgage our home. The provisions of the will forbid it, and I shall live up to those provisions absolutely.”

The silence which followed was vocal with astonishment. The man looked from husband to wife for signs of quarrelling, but Elizabeth returned his gaze quietly, and without signs of anger, and John also gave no indication of anything but surprise. After a gasping instant, during which his instincts warned him to keep on the side of decency, John accepted the situation with seeming calm.

“Well, Mr. Johnson, if Mrs. Hunter feels that way about it, there’s nothing to do. I’m sorry to have brought you over on a fool’s errand,” he said suavely, “but it can’t be helped now. We’ll take the land later, however,” and ushered his guest out of the house and helped him untie his team without any sign of the tempest within.

John went back to the house with no concealment and no cajolery.

“We may as well know where we are and what we mean to do right here and now, Elizabeth,” he began. “If you’re going to do this kind of thing, I want to know it.”

Elizabeth was ready for the storm, and met it without flurry. She looked at her husband quietly, steadily, sorrowfully.

“I shall sign no mortgages, if that is what you are in doubt about,” she said. “I had not intended to ask for a legal division of the property, but since you demand the right to make loans, I shall not cripple your plans with what is your own. I will have my part set aside; you can farm it in any way you choose, but you can only mortgage what is yours. I would have told you so if you had played fair and discussed this thing with me instead of leaving the house or blustering. You can tell me what you mean to do where I am concerned—you would if I were a man—or you can take just what you did to-day. You try to put me where I can’t help myself before strangers when you want me to do a thing you know I don’t think I ought to do; and you can’t handle me that way any longer.”

John Hunter had been working himself into a passion as he listened and burst out:

“And You’ll work for the best interests of this farm, that’s what You’ll do! Every time I ask you to sign a paper you make a little more fuss. Because I got in pretty deep before is no sign I’m going to do it again, and when I tell you to sign anything You’ll do it.”

His feet were very wide apart, and he thrust his face forward at her, his eyes glaring into hers with every trick which instinct prompted him to use in compelling her obedience.

Elizabeth barely glanced at him, and then looked down at the floor, quietly considering in what way she should reply to such an attack.

John was disconcerted; his little stage play had fallen flat.

After a moment’s pause, Elizabeth began very quietly:

“I will not interfere with anything you do about the land which has been left to me, except that I will not have one cent of mortgage on it. If you will keep out of debt, you can manage it any way you choose, but I will have every step of the business explained to me which involves the safety of my home, and it will be explained to me beforehand—or the same thing will happen that has

just happened. I will not be deceived, even in little things."

The girl looked him squarely and kindly in the face, but her look was as firm as if he had not blustered.

"I have not deceived you. I brought this man here and explained the whole thing before your face, besides telling you the other day that I intended to have that land."

"You are shuffling with the truth, and you know it," she said sternly. "You did not tell me you had made any arrangements with him, nor that you intended to do so, only in a general way. You thought you'd catch me before him when it came to signing the papers, and then you thought I couldn't help myself."

"I have not tried to deceive you! I brought him here and explained every detail," he said with such a righteous appearance of innocence that Elizabeth was tempted to laugh. "We've fallen to a pretty state of affairs when my own wife hints at my having lied to her," John insisted.

Elizabeth spoke slowly, measuring her words, realizing that the crisis of their lives was upon them.

"I will not accuse you any more, but I will explain the plan on which I will do business with you."

"You needn't bother," John interrupted sarcastically. "I will let you run it." 519

"I will not go into debt," Elizabeth continued as calmly as if he had not interrupted. "That is the absolute decision I have come to. You will not explain to me *after* you have decided to do a thing and in the presence of other people, where my property and my freedom are concerned. On the other hand, if you are determined to go into debt and branch out into a larger business, I feel that I cannot deny you the right to do as you wish with what is your own, and if you choose to do so will divide the property and leave you as free to mortgage and sell as if you were not married to me. I will leave you as free as I ask to be myself."

"Free! Free to be made a fool of. No, ma'am; you don't run any such gag as that on me. The people in this community are only too anxious to talk about me; they'd roll it under their tongues like a sweet morsel, that as soon as you got hold of the money you put the screws on me. You gave Johnson just such a handle this afternoon as that. You'll behave yourself, and look after your house and child as a woman ought to do, and I'll take charge of the work out of doors as a man ought to do."

Elizabeth interrupted him eagerly:

"Now right there, John, you have struck the very heart of the thing which first made me feel that I must take care of myself in my own way. You have never allowed me to bake a pie or a loaf of bread, nor churn, nor anything without you told me how to do it; and then you feel that you have the right to mortgage the home right over my head and think I have no rights in the matter." 520

It was John's turn to interrupt eagerly.

"Who put that home over your head?" he asked, for the first time addressing himself to the real issue of the home.

Elizabeth looked at him steadily. She was surprised to find herself talking thus quietly, she who had been so prone to emotional hindrances.

"Since I have been in your house I have had my food and clothes. I don't have to tell you that my mere work is worth far more than that. I have borne you a child. Motherhood entitles me to a share in the estate, since I have the child on my hands; besides, I could have been teaching school these years and not only earned my living but have been free to go and come as I have never been free here."

"That has nothing to do with it. You are married and your duty lies here as well as your work. It's a wife I want. If you're going to be a wife, be one; if you're going to be a boss, I want to know it, and I'll get out."

"Two things I will have my say about: I will not mortgage the half of the land which is mine, and I will not be interfered with when I have to correct Jack," Elizabeth said slowly. "Also when I see fit to go anywhere I shall go hereafter. I was never allowed to go to see Aunt Susan, and she went down to her death thinking I didn't want to come. Of course that's different now: I do go when I want to these days, but I got my first warning right there that I must take care of myself. You don't intend to tell me anything about what you mean to do with me, ever, if you can help it." 521

"You'll go into Colebyville and sign the papers on that land all the same," John said doggedly.

"I will sign no papers till there is a legal division of the property, John. I mean what I say. I'll let people talk if you crowd me before them," the girl said decisively.

John glared at her in desperation.

"Damn it! no wonder folks talked the week we were married! I've been humiliated ever since I brought you into this house," the man cried, breaking into a passion again. "A pretty figure You'll cut, with this last thing added to your reputation. Everybody knows you couldn't get along with your father. I let you down easy with Johnson just now, in spite of the humiliating place you put me in, but if you think I'm going to be driven at your beck and call you're mistaken."

John stopped to give effect to his words. He was just beginning to realize that Elizabeth was not giving up, and that it was a fight to the finish. The feature John disliked was that it was a fight in

the open. Well, let her fight in the open, she should see that he would not be beaten.

Elizabeth, to be less conscious of the eyes glaring at her, picked up her sewing, which had been tossed on the lounge an hour ago, and began to ply her needle.

John broke out anew, really losing control of himself this time.

“It’s the most outrageous thing I ever heard of—a woman humiliating her husband by refusing to sign papers when he has brought the man right into the house to fix them up! A pretty reputation I’ll get out of it! It’s sickening, disgusting. What do you expect me to do? Tell me that. If I want to buy a load of hay or a boar pig, am I to say to a man, ‘Wait till I ask my wife if I can?’” 522

He stood leering at her, hot with passion, determined to make her speak. The vulgarity of his discussion nauseated her, but since she must discuss, she was resolved to do it quietly and on decent ground as far as she was concerned. Without fear she replied slowly:

“You know perfectly well what I have asked of you, John. You won’t gain anything by blustering. I mean to be consulted on all important matters like loans, deeds, and mortgages, exactly as you’d consult with a man, and I intend to be consulted *before* the thing is done, and not have you take advantage of me in the presence of strangers. You needn’t shuffle matters. You understand what I mean, and you can’t fool me. Be sensible and do the right thing by me, and give me the chance to do the right thing by you.”

“I’ve done the right thing by you already, and I’ll go about my own affairs as a man should, and You’ll attend to your own affairs as a woman should if you live with me, and leave me free to act like a man. Do you understand that?” he demanded.

“I’m sorry, John,” she said, falling back to the needle, which she had let rest again for a moment. There was a little choke in her voice, but she was firm. 523

“What do you mean by that?” he asked, suspicious that she was not giving up as he intended that she should do.

“I mean just what I said a minute ago: I will let you mortgage your half of this farm after it is divided, but I will not sign any such papers on the other half. I will not be taken advantage of before strangers; I will let them talk first, and I will take care of my house as I see fit. Also, I will not speak when you manage Jack, and you will not interfere when I have to do it—that is, we will not interfere with each other *before the child*.”

John Hunter’s face turned scarlet, his cheeks stung as if he had been slapped; she was not giving in at all! He stood before her incensed beyond words for a moment, breathing hard and almost bursting with what he considered the insult of it; then the blood which had mounted to his head receded and left him deadly white.

“I don’t exactly understand you,” he said in level tones, “but you shall understand me. I will never be made a fool of by you again; if you’re going to run things, say it out, and I’ll let you have it and run it alone.”

It was hopeless; she did not reply, but stitched in and out on Jack’s little frock, sick at heart with the shame of such a quarrel, since it was to accomplish nothing.

“Answer me!” he thundered.

Elizabeth laid her sewing on the lounge beside her, and rose to her feet. She looked him squarely in the face and answered as he demanded.

“I will sign no papers of which I do not approve, and certainly none which I have been deceived about in any way. Aside from that you are free to run the farm as you wish.” 524

“Then take the whole damned thing, and I’ll go back to mother and make a home for her. She was never allowed to have a home in this house after you came into it,” he flung out. “I’ll take the Mitchell County land, and you can have what’s here. That’s what you and Hornby and Hansen planned from the first, I should judge. That’s why you got Noland to do it.”

Thrusting his hat down to his very ears, he strode from the house, swinging the screen door behind him so hard that it broke and the split corner fell out and hung dangling by the net, which kept the splintered frame from falling to the ground.

Elizabeth closed the panelled door to keep out the flies, and turned quietly to the bedroom for her bonnet. She spoke to Hepsie, who had heard the entire argument, as she passed through the kitchen, asking her to keep Jack for her, and walked through the barnyard, through the wet pasture, and on to her haunt in the willows, where she could think undisturbed.

John was still standing in the harness room of the barn when he heard the door close behind Elizabeth, and saw her coming that way.

Elizabeth was coming to the barn! He gave a start of surprise. Even while he had not given up all thought of her coming to his terms, he wondered at her giving in so promptly. John drew back so that she should not see that he was watching her. When she did not immediately appear he thought with a smile of satisfaction that she had stopped, not finding it easy to approach after the haughty manner in which she had just dismissed his demands. He waited a moment, considering terms of capitulation, and then walked unconcernedly out. 525

The truth broke upon him. She had passed the barn, she was on her way to the willows, not to him. Something in John Hunter sickened.

Up to the moment when John had seen his wife coming toward him he had been fully prepared to stand by the terms of dissolution which he had made. But in that moment when he watched her recede from him in the direction of the willows, the tide of his feelings turned; he wished he had not issued his ultimatum; he wished he had not put it to the test.

The triumph of receiving her submission had been his first thought when he had seen her come from the house, and it had been a sweet morsel while it had lasted, but when he had seen her going from him toward the willows, he suddenly realized that triumph had slipped from his grasp. Suddenly he desired to possess her. Not since the first six weeks of their acquaintance had Elizabeth looked so fair to him. He had put her away! A great sob rose up in him. He had said that he would go back to his mother, and his fate was sealed. He had gone to the barn to saddle his horse and start on the instant for Mitchell County and the cattle he had chosen as his portion, but all at once the glamour of his going died away and he saw the choice he had made. 526
To crown his cheerless flight, Jack was at Nathan Hornby's, and pride would not let him follow the child up even when he was going away forever. Nate Hornby had had something to do with this business of Elizabeth getting the money, and he had also had something to do with her determination to take the money out of his, her husband's, hands, and he, John Hunter, would not humble himself before him. Long before Elizabeth's return from the willows her husband was away.

Great was Elizabeth Hunter's surprise when John did not appear at supper. She had not taken him seriously; he had always blustered, and while she had realized that he was angry enough to make his word good, she had supposed that he would make a division of the property if he intended to leave her, and make arrangements for the child. She did not believe that he was gone, and answered the observations and questions of the hired men by saying that he had probably gone for the baby. In fact, having once said it, it sounded plausible to her, and she waited till far into the night for the sound of his horse's footsteps.

The suspicion which at midnight was yet a suspicion was by morning a certainty, but Elizabeth kept her own counsel, and when Nathan brought Jack at noon she did not speak of her husband's absence. The second day the hired men began to make mention of it, and the evening of the third day Luther Hansen appeared at the sitting-room door. 527

"Lizzie, what's this I hear about Hunter?" he asked, looking searchingly into her face.

Elizabeth told him all that she knew, except the unjust thing he had said about Luther.

"I don't know anything about his plans," she concluded, "except that he said he meant to go to his mother after he had marketed the cattle. You'll hear from the neighbours that Hugh's money has set me up and made a fool of me, and various other things," she added; and she saw in his face that it had already been said.

The girl sat and looked into the night through the open door for a moment and then went on:

"I shall go to Colebyville to-morrow, and see Doctor Morgan and look after business matters. I'll tell you what we decide upon when I get home. There'll have to be a real division of the property now. I don't know what to do about living here alone. I suppose there'll be every kind of gossip?"

The last part of the sentence was a question, and one Luther was not the man to evade.

"You'll have a lot of talk that hain't got no truth in it to meet," he said reluctantly. "You'll have t' have some one with you here. You couldn't git Hornby, could you?" Luther knew the nature of the gossip the neighbours would wreak upon her.

A light fell upon Elizabeth.

"The very idea!" she exclaimed. "Just what I need to do and at the same time just what I would love to do."

Luther was delighted that that important feature of the matter could be so easily arranged. He 528
could not bear to have her mixed up with any sort of scandal, when her neighbours so little understood the real situation, and would be so ready to strike her wherever they could.

"Then you go an' see Hornby to-night, Lizzie. Have Jake hitch up for you, an' take Hepsie along." Luther paused a moment and then proceeded on another phase of her troubles.

"Lizzie, how do you feel about it? Do you—would you like t' have 'im back? 'Cause if you would, I'll go to Mitchell County for you. You ain't goin' t' have no easy time of it here. Folks—specially th' women's—goin' t' have it in for you quite a bit."

"No," Elizabeth answered promptly. "I'll take whatever comes from my neighbours. I can shut my doors and keep them outside, but, Luther, I can't go on as things have been on the inside of my own house. I don't want to talk about it at all, even to you, but I shall let him go. It's better than some other things. We'd simply come to the place where we had to understand each other. I'd a great deal rather have him back than to have him gone, but he wouldn't understand at all if I sent for him."

Luther looked at her approvingly and yet something in him held back. He longed to spare her all the low tittle-tattle of her neighbours, the coarse jests of the hired men among themselves, and the eternal suspicions of the women.

"I know all you would say, Luther," she said, understanding his reluctance to give up. "I know what these women who think I haven't wanted to visit them will say, and I don't blame them, 529
but I will not send for him now or ever. I have wronged him in ways he has known nothing of—

maybe the scandal I haven't deserved at his hands will square that deal a little—but that is not the present difficulty. We'll have to have an agreement about our plan of life together. If he ever comes back I shall never deceive him again, but I will never be deceived by him again, either."

"Well, you know best, Lizzie. I'll talk to Jake for you. You'd best try t' keep him an' Hepsie. They're good friends an' you're goin' t' need friends."

Luther saw that the buggy was got ready for Elizabeth and Hepsie, and after they had gone talked to the men, telling them that Elizabeth had asked him to do so. He told them her offer was for them to stay on at the usual wage, or go now so that she could fill their places. After they had signified their willingness to remain in her employment, he took Jake aside and had a long talk with him.

Jake Ransom filled with anger when the two were alone.

"I didn't say anything when you was a talkin' t' them men," he said confidentially, "but I ain't lived in this house for close on three year now without learnin' somethin'. Damned fool! never done nothin' she's wanted 'im to since I've been here. She got 'er eye-teeth cut when Mis Hornby died, but it most killed 'er. I've watched 'er a gittin' hold of 'erself gradual-like, an' I knew there'd be an end of his bossin' some day. Gosh! I'm glad she got th' money! Noland was some fond of her." 530

Jake stole a sidelong glance at Luther as he said it and waited to see if he would elicit an answer. When Luther did not reply, he added:

"I'm dog'on glad I've been here. Lots of folks 'll ask me questions, an' won't I be innocent? You kin help at your end of this thing too. I guess we kin do it 'tween us."

The understanding was perfect, but Jake took warning by Luther's refusal to discuss private affairs. Without saying just what was intended, each knew what course of action the other meant to take, and so Elizabeth was granted friends at the critical moment of her life and spared much that was hard in a community where personalities were the only topics of conversation.

Nathan Hornby was only too glad to live in the house with Jack Hunter. As he remarked, it would take no more time to drive over to his work than to cook his own breakfast in the morning.

Hepsie was at this time Elizabeth's principal defender. While listening to the reading of the will on the day of the funeral, Hepsie, old in the ways of her little world, had known that some explanation would have to be made of so unusual a matter as a man leaving his money to another man's wife, instead of to the man himself, and had begun by giving out the report which she intended the world to accept, by talking to Sadie Hansen before she got out of the dooryard. 531 Hepsie knew that first reports went farthest with country folk, and Luther, who understood better than any one else why the money had been left to Elizabeth, was inwardly amused at Sadie's explanations afterward.

"You know, Luther," Sadie had said on the way home that day, "Mr. Noland told Hepsie he was agoin' t' leave his share of th' land to Lizzie, 'cause Doc Morgan says She'll never be strong again after overworkin' for all them men, an' things. An' she says he felt awful bad 'cause he was a layin' there sick so long an' her a havin' t' do for 'im when she wasn't able—an' do you know, she thinks that's why he killed hisself? I always did like 'im. I think it was mighty nice for him t' leave 'er th' stuff. My! think of a woman havin' a farm all 'er own!"

And Luther Hansen listened to Sadie telling her mother the same thing the next day, and smiled again, for Mrs. Crane could talk much, and was to talk to better purpose than she knew.

Also, when Elizabeth went to the little schoolhouse to meeting the first Sunday of her widowhood, being determined to be a part of the community in which she lived, Hepsie was on the outskirts of the little crowd after services were over, to explain in a whisper that Lizzie was "goin' t' go t' meetin' now like she'd always wanted to do, only Mr. Hunter never 'd take 'er anywhere 'cause 'e felt hisself too good."

Hepsie was to fight Elizabeth's battles on many occasions and stayed on, watchful as a hawk of Elizabeth's reputation. A sly joke among the hired men while discussing their position in the 532 house of "the grass-widder" drove Hepsie beside herself and made her even more ready than she had been at first to serve the interests of one who was to have no easy time among her jealous neighbours. Elizabeth knew that in that hour she could have had most of these people for her friends had it not been that she was supposed to be "stuck-up." This also was a price she was to pay for having let her husband dominate her.

When Doctor Morgan was told of Elizabeth's plan to farm the place herself he was delighted and approved of it heartily.

"You're a little brick, Mrs. Hunter," he said. "I'll back you in anything you decide to do. It was devilish mean to run off without settling affairs up. If any of these yahoos around here say anything about it they'll get a setting up from me that they won't want again. But I'm mighty glad you've got Hornby. That'll keep actual slander off of you. How much did you say you owed now?"

"Five hundred—and some expenses for Mr. Noland—besides the note you hold for the team. I've got about a hundred in the bank, but I shall need a pony to ride about the farm, and that will

take about half of what I have ready.

"The pony's a good idea. There's no telling what would be made out of you wandering around the fields on foot to look after the hired men, but on horseback you'd be all right. Now don't you worry about that note of mine—I'm in no hurry," the doctor said encouragingly. Elizabeth saw the advantage of having Doctor Morgan as an enthusiastic advocate of her plans.

"What about the land, Doctor?" the girl asked next. "I want a legal division as soon as possible. Will it have to be appraised and sold?"

Doctor Morgan noted joyfully that Elizabeth Hunter had her business well in mind, and assured her that it would be only a formality to have the appraising done, as she could buy it in herself, and further assured her that he would himself confer with John after all was settled.

CHAPTER XXV

"THE WEIGHT OF A DOLLAREE AND OUT OF DEBT DON'T FORGET THAT"

Nathan Hornby moved promptly over to the Hunter farm, and established himself in Hugh's old room upstairs.

The farm work prospered under Elizabeth's management. She was fortunate enough to trade a young heifer with a calf at her side for Silas's pony, and because feed was scarce she sold most of the stock, keeping only such as she desired to open farming with the next spring. The hogs were marketed early, and the few steers left when the cattle had been taken to Mitchell County were sold to the first buyer who offered a reasonable figure for them; the cows which gave evidence of increase were kept and the rest sold. Altogether money enough was raised to pay the note for the team and all the outstanding indebtedness except the note for five hundred dollars. The latter did not mature till May and could stand. The expense of feeding discouraged the farmers and prices dropped steadily all winter.

When April came the Johnson land was sold to a stranger, who came and offered to buy the west eighty of Elizabeth's land. The five hundred would be due the next month. The new neighbour coveted that eighty, and Elizabeth decided that if she could get a price warranting its sale she would sell, pay off the five hundred, and put the rest into calves while they were cheap. She offered the land for thirty-five dollars an acre. It was unheard of! No one had ever asked so much for land in that country, but the man wanted to add that land to his farm, and after some bargaining paid the price.

Frugal and cautious, Elizabeth paid the five hundred with the first check she drew against the price of the land. That left two thousand for calves and three hundred for running expenses. John had taken one horse out of the new team when he went away, and Elizabeth decided not to buy another, but to hire a horse in harvesting time. There were three full teams for the plows, besides the horse which had been hurt in the runaway. It had recovered and, though scarred and stiffened, could be used for ordinary work. She took good care to have it hitched beside a solid, trusty mate and treated gently to soothe its wild nature.

No word had come from John except when Doctor Morgan wrote him of the appraisement of the land. Then a curt letter had been received saying that whatever they did would be satisfactory to him and that when the deeds came he would sign them. Not to be outdone, Elizabeth bought the portion of land which did not have the house and buildings, agreeing to rent the home eighty until such time as he should choose to sell it, and expressing a desire, since Jack had been born there, to buy the home if John should ever wish to part with it. To his suggestion that she use the home without rent—in fact, an offer of it as his share of support of the child—Elizabeth refused to listen.

"I'll rent it of him as I would of anybody, Doctor," she had replied, and made out a note on the spot.

John had written that he was in the commission business in Chicago, and did not say whether his mother was with him nor not. To Elizabeth he did not write, but to Jack he sent loads of toys and a sled at Christmas time.

Elizabeth had not attempted to communicate with John direct, but had rented his share of the land from him through Doctor Morgan. The sale of the west eighty gave her enough money to stock the place with every animal it would hold. When the girl began to look about her for calves, she found that because of the price of corn many farmers were selling their hogs at a sacrifice. Hogs were quick money. She invested in such as were ready for increase, and by harvest time there was a fine lot of pigs on the Hunter farm. Every cow had been milked, and the calves raised by hand so as to have the milk for the young pigs till the early corn could be gathered. Milking was hard work, but Elizabeth Hunter's pride was up.

Elizabeth's pride had had some sore pricks. In spite of every effort to avoid hearing the small talk regarding herself, Elizabeth had been obliged to listen to such portions as dribbled through

from her mother, and an occasional remark from Sadie Hansen. Sadie Hansen's life was a reorganized one, but there were small lapses, and from force of habit she repeated things, though she was in the main about the kindest neighbour Elizabeth had. With Mrs. Farnshaw the case was different. She was Elizabeth's mother, and certain privileges must be accorded her because of the relationship. When she chose to disapprove of the separation of her daughter from her husband, the daughter was compelled to recognize her right to protest, and often inadvertently to listen to the gossip which her mother urged as reasons for her objections. Mrs. Farnshaw came often and talked volubly. Elizabeth shielded herself as best she could from her mother's prattlings, but had to endure many tearful complaints, for her mother was suffering much loneliness and discomfort since her daughter's marriage. Josiah Farnshaw did not forget, nor let his wife forget, the disaffection of Elizabeth.

Once when Mrs. Farnshaw had gone beyond the mark where her daughter could receive it in silence, urging that Elizabeth call her husband home and submit herself to the matrimonial yoke, the girl turned upon her in annoyance:

"You'd have me just where you are yourself, ma. You say pa mistreats you—that's just what was coming to me. If I didn't have money enough that was all my own to live on, my husband would be sneering at me and keeping me in hot water all the time, exactly as pa sneers at you."

"But you're separated!" Mrs. Farnshaw cried.

"Yes," the girl said slowly, "and because we are separated I can go to town if I like, I can go to church, I can go to see a neighbour, or my mother, without hating to ask for a horse to drive or being told when to come home, and when Jack is naughty I can talk to him without having anybody set his little will against mine and make it harder to deal with him. Oh, mother mine! Can't you see that I'm happier than you are?"

"But, you're livin' apart and—and folks is a talkin'!" the mother exclaimed hopelessly.

"Let them talk. Their talk don't hurt me, and it shouldn't hurt you. They don't talk before me."

"But they talk behind your back, Lizzie," Mrs. Farnshaw said with a wise nod of the head.

"They talked about us when John was here, ma, and they always talk about us; it doesn't matter much what they talk about; they wouldn't pay off the mortgage, nor the interest, nor raise Jack right, nor give me a chance to rest on washday. Some will say I was in the wrong, some that John was, and they all said that I was stuck-up and wouldn't visit with them when it wasn't so at all. They are looking to see *who* was wrong; I have reasoned out *what* was wrong. It's principles, not personalities, that get people into troubles that don't seem to have any way out. Oh! can't you see, ma, that I'm free, and the women that talk about me are just where they've always been. Free! and don't forget that I'm out of debt. That's more than you've got by staying with your husband, and you haven't been able to keep people from talking after all. Free, and out of debt! Don't forget it."

"Well, you wouldn't 'a' been free, either, if Mr. Noland hadn't 'a' left you th' money," Mrs. Farnshaw replied.

Elizabeth dropped into a retrospective mood for a moment before she answered, and then said slowly:

"I know that. God in Heaven, how well I know it! And do you know I think about it every day—what could be done for the poor women on these hot Kansas prairies if there were some way to see that every girl that loves a man enough to marry him could have money enough to keep her if she couldn't live under the work and children he crowds on her. I'm free, because I have money enough all my own to live on. That's the weight of a dollar. Don't forget that, you poor ma, who have never had a dollar except what has been doled out to you by the man you married. The weight of a dollar," Elizabeth added meditatively, "that's what it is!"

Mrs. Farnshaw, who had bought the groceries for her little family with the butter and eggs, and whose sugar had sometimes been short because there was a supply of Horse Shoe Plug to provide also, had no answer ready.

CHAPTER XXVI

"WAS—WAS MY PAPA HERE THEN?"

Two years of favourable weather and good fortune with her livestock saw the money Elizabeth had invested in hogs doubled and trebled, and later, when the Johnson land was again offered for sale, she was able to buy it for cash and have the place well stocked after it was done. Silas Chamberlain, who watched Elizabeth with the same fatherly interest he had felt when her child was born, and who glowed with secret pride at the way in which she had won her way back into the country society about them, came in often and offered his measure of good-natured praise. He had prophesied the first time she had cooked for harvest hands that she would become a famous cook, but he had not expected to find her a famous farmer. What was still more

astonishing to the old man was that she had become noted in quite other ways. The move she had made in going to meeting the first Sunday after John's departure, and Hepsie's explanation of it, had worked to her advantage in reestablishing her in the community as one of its factors, and opened to her the opportunity to wield the influence which Luther had pointed out to her the best educated woman in a community should wield. She took a class in the little Sunday 541
school at the schoolhouse, not so much because she was an enthusiastic churchwoman as because it was the place where contact could be had. Elizabeth belonged to no church, but Elizabeth could turn the conversation of the church members, among whom she mingled, from gossip to better things, and there was not a quilting bee nor an aid society meeting in the country around to which she was not invited, and which she did not raise to a higher standard by her presence.

The snubs which the neighbour women were at first anxious to deliver fell flat in the quiet unconsciousness with which they were met. Elizabeth felt that much of the treatment she received was given in righteous indignation, and pursued the policy when possible to do so of not seeing it, and when it must be met to meet it with perfect good humour. She kept her credit good among the men with whom she bartered for young stock, and there began to creep in a better feeling for her within the first six months after she assumed the care of the farm and the problematical position of a "grass widow" in the neighborhood. Doctor Morgan, Hepsie, Jake, and Luther were splendid assets in the race with public feeling, and Silas saw his young neighbour's affairs straighten out with chuckles of delight. He watched her manœuvre with her business deals and saw the cool-headedness of them with growing enthusiasm. He passed Nathan on his way to the field one spring morning and noticed that Nathan was using a seeder from the Hunter farm. It was bright with a coat of freshly dried paint. 542

"That's what she borrowed my brushes for last week," he exclaimed to Nathan. "Ever see anything like 'er?" he asked admiringly. "Takes care of everything. Did you ever see th' likes of them hogs? She's made more money sellin' that land an' buyin' of it back 'n most of us old heads 'll make in five year. Everything she touches seems t' have a wad stuck under it somewheres."

Elizabeth was more than merely successful in money matters; she was a reorganized woman from the standpoint of health also. She was no more the weary, harassed woman who had churned, baked, and cooked for shellers, and had so nearly found an early grave. The satisfaction of working unrestrained, of resting when nature and woman's constitution demanded, and the whole matter of living without fear, had given her a sound and healthy body and a mind broader and less liable to emotional bias. The principle which she had demanded from her husband in their last conversation she put into practice. Hepsie ruled the house very much as if it were her own. Elizabeth knew from experience the dreariness of housework where all individuality is denied the worker. Hepsie came and went as the exigencies of the work permitted, and there was always a horse provided for her journeys away from the place; in fact, Hepsie was much more free than her mistress had been in her first three years in the same house. Elizabeth demanded good service, but she gave good service also, and from being a good joke to work for the grass widow, it came to be recognized that the Hunter farm was a good place to live, and when the spring came around the men who had worked there the season 543
before always presented themselves for fresh hiring.

Two years more passed, and Master Jack Hunter was seven years old. On his seventh birthday his mother dressed him and herself carefully and rode over to the lonely graveyard. She did not go flower-laden. Rather, she went as was her custom, to spend an hour with the quiet dead in silent thought. Hugh Noland's sacrifice had not been in vain. The life he had laid down had, whatever its mistakes and weaknesses, been a happy one to himself, and had carried a ray of cheer to all with whom it had come in contact, while his death had pointed toward an ideal of purity, in spite of failures. That brief period during which Elizabeth had been compelled to live a double life for his sake had held many lessons, and had forever weaned her from duplicity of any sort. Those special hours—the hours spent beside Hugh Noland's grave—were spent in searching self-inquiry, in casting up accounts, in measuring herself against the principles with which she struggled. People had gone out of her wrestlings; principles remained. Here Elizabeth meditated upon the fact that because the neighbourhood sentiment and discussion centred around their home, she and John Hunter had missed a golden opportunity in not having become a force for good during those first years of their marriage.

The hour spent beside Hugh's grave was her sacrament. There she went to renew her faith in her own powers, which Hugh's interest and estimates had first taught her to recognize; there 544
she went to renew her vows of higher living, and there to contemplate the freedom which Hugh Noland had given her. But for the land and stock which gave her an independent income she would have been as tearful, worn, and despondent as many of the women about her. Her heart was very tender toward Hugh as she sat beside his grave to-day. She held his letter—the only one he had ever written, her—in her hands. As she read it over, part of its last sentence, "and will, I hope, help toward emancipating you from care," struck her attention, and her eyes filled with tears.

"What is it, mamma? What hurts?" Jack asked, always quick to respond to his mother's moods.

"Nothing, dear, but Uncle Hugh's letter. He wrote it just before he died. He was very kind to me," she said, patting the face thrust up for a kiss.

"Was—was my papa here then?" the child asked, curious about the life he could not remember, and trying to relate things as he heard of them in their true relation to the father who was a mysterious personage and therefore interesting.

When his mother did not answer, he crept closer and, laying his head against her arm, said wistfully:

“Mamma, will my papa ever come back to us?”

“I don’t know, Jack,” she answered quietly. “Perhaps. If he don’t, you shall go and see him when you are a big boy. Now run away, and leave mamma a chance to think for a whole ten minutes.” 545

The child ran off to the horses, and Elizabeth faced the life she led. A curious thing was made plain to her in that hour—namely, that Hugh, whom she remembered tenderly, was but a memory, while John Hunter, the father of her child, whom she had no other cause to love, was a living force in her life, and that at the child’s simple question a longing flamed up, and a feeling that she wished he were there. She remembered him as he would ride with his hat in his hand, his fair, soft hair wind-blown about his temples, and she would have been glad to go forth to meet him and try anew to build a life together which would be livable to both.

A long time she pondered, and the impulse to write to him came over her, but that impulse was followed by retrospection, and as one thing after another arose out of the past in solemn procession, closing with the unloved and unwished-for child which she had lost five years ago, she knew that she would not open a correspondence. At that point, and with the memory of the sweltering day and the unnecessary churning, her tender memory of Hugh, who had made her free and economically independent, welled up in her in one glad tide of thanksgiving, and she thought of her mother and the thousands of other women on these Kansas prairies who had not been saved from such a fate by being made independent landowners, and she pondered on their fate till she longed for a way out for all women who were mothers.

“This income could have set John free too, if he would only have thought it over,” she said to herself. “He need not have been burdened with us while he was getting his depths in the business world,” she concluded. 546

Wherever Elizabeth’s thoughts turned to-day, John was the centre of them. Elizabeth had never been resentful toward her husband, and the never-ceasing cause of speculation and comment in the neighbourhood had been upon the fact that though she lived apart from him, she never seemed to think of divorce. Elizabeth’s attitude toward John was that of a mother who waits for a child to find the real light on a situation. She rarely heard from him, and never directly. She knew of some of his affairs through Doctor Morgan, with whom John corresponded when business required, but she wrote regularly to Mrs. Hunter, who had gone to her son the second year he had been away, and who had written to her at that time. Elizabeth had been glad of so simple a means of keeping the link unbroken between him and his child. It had been no part of her plan to separate Jack from his father. She would not ask John to return, but she wished him to have such knowledge of his son as his temper would permit. She wrote such details of the home and the child as would interest them, knowing that John would read the letters. Somehow, to-day she wished that she could write to him direct, but as she thought she shook her head.

“It cannot be,” she said aloud.

“Mamma, if you don’t come we won’t have time to go for the mail,” Jack called.

The pleasant afternoon had waned; Elizabeth Hunter gazed about her in astonishment; it was indeed late. 547

She stooped and passed her hand over the name cut in the marble slab. “Hugh Noland, aged twenty-nine.”

“Hugh Noland, dear,” she said aloud, “you have set me financially free, but there is another kind of freedom I have got to win for myself. I’ve got to tell John the things that we wanted to tell and were too cowardly to do. If we ever come together again I shall tell it out, if all this country gets to hear it. Jack can better afford to take the disgrace of it than to have a mother who carries it about with her as a secret. Without honesty no other virtue is a virtue at all.”

Elizabeth’s eyes were full of tears as she voiced her vow, but there was a sense of relief welling up within her that she had not known in all the five years Hugh had lain here. She stood very quiet till her emotions were under control and her sunny self in command again, then she blew a kiss at Aunt Susan’s grave and went to the waiting child and with him rode a merry race toward Colebyville.

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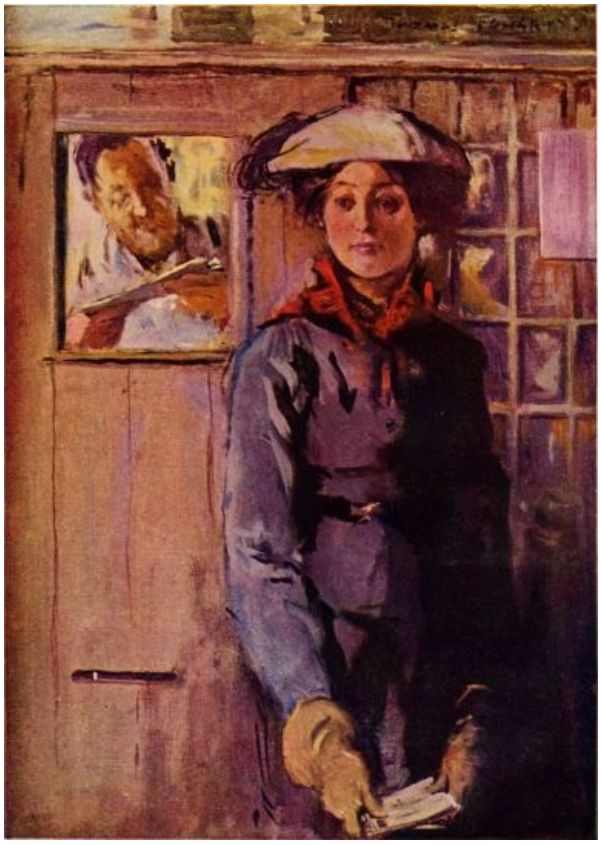
CHAPTER XXVII

TO DO OVER, AND TO DO BETTER, WAS THE OPPORTUNITY OFFERED

Elizabeth Hunter and her son were still breathing hard from rapid riding when they drew up in front of the post-office. Elizabeth dropped from the saddle, tossing her rein to Jack to hold till her return, and went inside. She was to remember this day and the dingy little window through which mail was passed. The postmaster was a new man and tossed the letters out carelessly; therefore he did not see the sudden start the girl gave as she began to gather them up.

John Hunter’s familiar handwriting stared at her from the top envelope.

Elizabeth thought of many things while she waited for the man to run through the newspapers and magazines. Half an hour ago she had registered a vow beside Hugh Noland’s grave. She was to be tested promptly. When all was handed out to her, she took the pile—Elizabeth’s magazines supplied the entire community with reading material, and were handed from house to house till as ragged as the tumble weeds of her native Kansas—and put them all in the canvas bag at Jack’s saddle horn. The letter was unopened. Something made her wait. Something said that John was asking to return—to do over, and to do better, was the opportunity offered to her. Her vow rose up before her; without the fulfillment of that vow there could be no *better*, that she recognized—and yet——



“JOHN HUNTER’S FAMILIAR HANDWRITING STARED AT HER FROM THE TOP ENVELOPE”

All through the long ride home she pondered upon the past and upon the possibilities of the 549
future. Not till after Jack was safely tucked away in his bed, not till Hepsie had her supper work done and had gone upstairs and all the various members of her household had retired for the night, and she was certain of hours for uninterrupted thinking, did Elizabeth Hunter bring out the unopened letter and lay it on the table before her. Even then she renewed her vow before she broke the seal. Was he the old John, who would fly out impulsively and cover them all with disgrace if she told him? she asked herself many times. In a cold sweat of terror, she asked herself also if it were possible to build right in this new endeavour without telling John of the love which she had shown to Hugh; the temptation was terrible, but she was compelled to shake her head. The habit of openness and fair dealing would not hold her excused; there was no other way, she must tell it out. Carefully she went over all the things that would be lost if this story should be bruited abroad. Jack would be disgraced, she would be stripped of her influence in the neighbourhood, slain in the sight of her friends who had fought her battles for her because they believed in her, stripped of everything which had gone to make life worth the living, and she
would place herself in the power of a man whose only attitude toward the story might be one of 550
self-righteous justification. Was it worth the price? Her own words rose up before her, “Without honesty no other virtue is a virtue at all.” Elizabeth pondered a long time, and again her own words rose up to confront her, “It does not matter *who* is wrong, the thing that matters is *what* is wrong,” and for Elizabeth there was no escape. This had been the philosophy of her life; she was called upon to stand or fall on that ground. With her head bowed in acknowledgment, she drew the missive out of its envelope and began to read:

> Dear Elizabeth: This letter will no doubt surprise you, but I couldn’t wait any longer. I might begin by saying that I was homesick for Jack—which is true—but I’m going to confess that I’m homesick for you too. Is there still hope? I would have written you long ago, but I went into things too heavy and lost the money I got for the cattle—and then I couldn’t. It would have looked like asking to come back to the land. As you know, I mortgaged the home eighty—it hurt some to do that, knowing you’d have to sign it—and began slower. I got along very well, but it was terribly tedious, and at last, after three years of steady work, and no debts, I couldn’t wait any longer, and put half of what I had on the Board of Trade proceedings. *I won!* Last Saturday I sold all I had,

and now while I can come to you right, I want to ask if you will take me? Take me quick, if you are going to, before I do some reckless thing and lose it again. I hear you have prospered; that was why I had to wait so long. I often think of dear old Hugh, and his interest in some of the things about the neighbourhood, and I have been given to see while living in this rotten hole of a city how much I underestimated the people about us in Kansas. I would be glad to come back and live among them. Will you let me? A telegram will bring me to you on the next train.

With love to both you and Jack, who will be seven years old this week,

Affectionately,

JOHN.

The tension was broken. Elizabeth laid the letter back with a smile. How like John to suggest a telegram! John never could wait. How well she knew his little weaknesses; the written characters of the missive had the flowing curves of haste in their running letters. He had written on the impulse of the moment, no matter how long the desire had been in his heart. The very spontaneity of the confession was unpremeditated and worked in John Hunter's favour. He had remembered Jack's birthday too! That day seven years ago rose up in Elizabeth's memory to plead for Jack's father. She earnestly desired John's presence, and yet—could it be done?

Far into the night Elizabeth Hunter sat with the letter before her, reading and rereading it, pondering upon the possibilities of the future, seeing them in the light of the past she had spent with him, wondering what sort of man her husband had become in the five years since she had seen him. The letter sounded as if those years might have been profitable ones. There was both the openness of real honesty and the reserve of real strength in the confession about his financial affairs. The most hopeful thing she found in the letter was the sentence about Hugh's estimate of the neighbours among whom they had lived and the implied comparison regarding the city in which he now did business. Dear old John! Had Chicago business men tried the methods on him that he had thought it fair to apply to his dealings with her? In the midst of that question rose the one—would John Hunter feel the same toward Hugh Noland's estimates when he was told the truth about his wife's affection for Hugh, and of the weakness of both in the demonstrations of that affection? Well, it had to be told. Scandal would be hard to face with no denial possible. Doctor Morgan had known it all and still trusted her; likewise Luther; but Hepsie, and Jake, and Sadie? Besides, Jack would have to know, and would suffer for things of which he was innocent! The girl wrestled with the subject till midnight, and long after. At last, to put it where she could not deceive herself, she wrote a simple statement of the whole thing and sealed it up with John's address upon the envelope, and then raising her hand solemnly promised herself that this letter which contained the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth should be mailed as she had written it without being opened to change a word. She would answer John's letter in one apart from this and send it by the same mail, but this letter she would send as it stood.

As she got up to go to bed, she picked up the bag in which they brought the mail and felt in it to see if anything were left. A small narrow book that opened endwise and had the name of the Bank of Colebyville on it was all. It was a fitting end to her considerations. She had never owned a checkbook till recent years. Because of its presence, she might yet be able to answer John Hunter as he wished. She thought long on her situation. There was no sleep in her. The larger, the universal, aspects of the question began to crowd in upon her mind.

"There is no other way," she said. "A woman, to be free, must have money of her own. She must not be supported by a man."

She stepped out on the porch and stood looking toward the east. The refreshing breeze which had sprung up cooled and invigorated her.

"The wind before the dawn! The beginning of a new day!" she said aloud.

Turning toward the kitchen, she began to pack a box which stood waiting on the end of the kitchen table. Doughnuts, cookies and pies had been left there to cool the evening before. Mrs. Farnshaw was to have threshers to cook for to-day, and Elizabeth had grown thoughtful of the mother, who was aging visibly. In such ways as she could, she spared her mother's strength and gave her the comfort of frequent visits and companionship. In order to get the long eight-mile drive over before it became hot, it was necessary to get an early start, and Elizabeth, with Jack at her side, was on the road before the sun was fairly above the horizon.

About eight o'clock Mrs. Farnshaw turned at the sound of their feet on her doorstep. She set her cob basket on the floor, put the stove lid over the roaring fire, and turned to Jack with grandmotherly delight.

"You're a real comfort, Lizzie," she said, straightening up with Jack in her arms. "I never used t' think you would be, but you are. I'm that tired that I'm ready t' drop."

"Anything more than usual?" Elizabeth asked, noting the fagged and heavy face, and the gathering tears.

"Oh, nothin' more 'n 'as happened many a time; only 'e grows crosser, seems to me, as 'e grows older. He was particular bad last night, and I didn't sleep none. It's awful hot weather t' lay awake."

When Elizabeth did not reply, the mother said testily:

"Now I s'pose You'll be thinkin' that you don't have t' care for what a man says."

Elizabeth laughed, but not in her usual merry way.

“Perhaps,” she said slowly. “I was thinking farther than that—I was wondering——” She paused to think and then broke out suddenly. “John’s written to ask if he can come back, and I was just wondering——”

Mrs. Farnshaw was all animation at once, her own troubles forgotten.

“You don’t say?” she exclaimed. “Now look here, Lizzie, you’re goin’ t’ let him come?”

Elizabeth had told her mother on the impulse of the moment after withholding the news from Nathan and even from Jack. The child had been wriggling out of his grandmother’s arms and had not heard what his mother said. Elizabeth waited till he was out of hearing. She half regretted having mentioned it. She was going to have to argue out her decision with her mother, and she had made no decision.

The mother’s accidental remark had produced the impulse to tell. Well, it was all right. It might be that she could decide better after discussing it with some one. Elizabeth looked at her mother doubtfully.

“I don’t know, ma. I may. It’s all owing to whether we can agree on the terms of starting over.”

“You ain’t goin’ t’ lay down rules t’ him?” the mother cried in amazement.

“Now’s my time to find out what rules he’s going to lay down to me at least,” Elizabeth said dryly.

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“But I never heard of such a thing! Say, don’t you love ’im any more, Lizzie?”

“I—I think I do, ma,” Elizabeth said slowly. “But there’s the very trouble with women. They think they ought to love a man enough to take him without a definite understanding, and then they find that a woman’s love means mostly obedience to a man. Yes, I think I love him. But I’m going to know what he expects, and I’m going to tell him what I expect, and make no mistakes this time. We’ll know before we begin.”

“But he may not take you,” Mrs. Farnshaw said in a frightened whisper.

“I rather think I’m taking him,” Elizabeth said, beginning to unload the box of provisions she had brought. “You forget that I’m making my own living.”

“That *does* make a difference,” Mrs. Farnshaw admitted.

“That makes *all* the difference,” Elizabeth replied positively. “The longer I look at it the more convinced I am that the whole thing hinges right on that point. If we live together again I’ll know that it isn’t because he feels that having married me he must keep me in food and clothes, and he’ll know that it’s because I want to and not because I’ve got a child to be supported. I believe I love him; but if I didn’t know I could leave him in a minute if he made me do things that I wasn’t able to do I wouldn’t dare to say yes. Knowing that I don’t have to live with him if he begins to order me around, I think I’ll try it.”

“You’re a queer girl, Lizzie,” the mother said, puzzled and uncertain what to think of the philosophy she propounded. “You don’t seem to be afraid of men at all.”

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“I don’t have to be, ma, because no man will ever again pay for my food and clothes. You are not to tell anybody, even the boys. I may not do it yet. I didn’t intend to tell you for a while, but you insisted on telling me what I was thinking about, and it popped right out at you.”

Elizabeth gave her mother a tender look and added: “I told you first when he asked me before,” which was a thing her mother could understand and appreciate. Elizabeth was considerate of the little mother whose life was hard, and who was afraid of a man.

At that point Elizabeth fell into a brown study. She argued for her own rights, knowing that only on that path could peace come to either herself or John, but she did not feel herself wholly worthy, and John wholly unworthy; she knew her weaknesses, and she knew she had wronged John Hunter as well as he had wronged her; she was willing to take him if he would be as willing to correct his faults and confess them as she was willing to do. She did not ask of John Hunter that he be always right in his actions toward her, but that he discuss their grievances and let them look together for better ways of settling what was right for each. She was so deep in her own thoughts that she did not hear Jack, who called to her from the door:

“Mamma, let’s go! Come on! They’re going right now, mamma!”

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Elizabeth did not hear the child till he tugged at her skirts and exclaimed:

“Come on, mamma! Grandma won’t care. Come on!”

His mother looked down at the boy with a smile. How well she remembered the delights of threshing-day herself. She looked about the kitchen to see what had yet to be done.

“Wait a little, Jack. I’ve got to help get the table set and the dinner on to cook. You wouldn’t have me leave grandma to do all the work alone, would you?” she asked suggestively.

As Jack hesitated between his great desire to see the marvel of the stackyard and his desire to show as much manliness as his mother evidently expected of him, there was a noise on the doorstep and Hepsie came smilingly in.

“I followed you all on th’ pony,” she said. “I fixed it up with th’ boys yesterday t’ take a cold dinner to-day an’ let me come an’ help here. We’re lookin’ out that you don’t hurt yourself to-day, Mis Farnshaw,” she added, addressing the older woman.

“Now you can go to the threshing machine too, grandma!” Jack cried with delight. “Come on, let’s go right now!”

“Not now, Jack,” Elizabeth said. “Hepsie didn’t come to get the dinner alone.”

“Oh, yes, she did! She likes to,” Jack replied so confidently that they all laughed, and Hepsie fell on the child and hugged him.

“Of course I did, Jack. Grandma will show me what to do, and then she and mamma can take you out to see the machine go round and round like a big coffee mill, and maybe Jack can ride one of the horses.”

“Oh, Hepsie! Don’t put that into the child’s head,” Elizabeth interposed hastily. “I wouldn’t have him on one of those horses for anything.”

“Mamma says I spoil you, Jack. Run along now, and let me look after this dinner.”

As soon as the tables were set and the dinner on to cook, Elizabeth and her mother took the excited child and started to the barnyard. Mrs. Farnshaw was pulled along by the impatient grandson, and Elizabeth came at some distance behind, having stopped to glance in the chicken house as she went. The marvellous ant-hill called a stackyard would not permit Jack to wait for his mother.

Mr. Farnshaw saw them coming. He would gladly have avoided his wife and daughter, but Jack took things for granted and always insisted upon dragging his mother into his grandfather’s presence and mixing them up in the conversation. Elizabeth had dropped behind purposely, knowing her father’s feelings toward her, and did not hear Jack say persuasively:

“Grandpa, let Jack drive and make the horses go round.”

“No, no, Jack,” Mrs. Farnshaw said quickly. “Mamma said you could not go on the horsepower.”

Mr. Farnshaw gave his wife a look of disdain and, stooping, picked the child up. Mrs. Farnshaw gave a little cry. When his own team came around, Mr. Farnshaw walked in front of it and started toward the platform on which Albert stood swinging a long whip.

The “near horse” of the Farnshaw team was a stolid and reliable mare, mother of many colts. She was so placed because it had been decided to put a young stallion of uncertain temper beside her.

The restive, irritable beast sustained his reputation by nipping angrily at Mr. Farnshaw as he dodged under the straps with which the horses were tied to the reach ahead. To have passed in front of this team unencumbered and alone when the power was in motion would have been foolhardy; but with Jack in his arms it was an act of mock-heroics typical of the whole bull-headed character of Josiah Farnshaw. He stumbled slightly in springing out of the horse’s way, and with Jack, who was a load, in his arms, was barely able to keep his feet.

A shout went up from every man who saw the occurrence, and Albert shut off the power in the endeavour to stop the machine.

Mr. Farnshaw sprang toward the inner corner of the triangular space occupied by the team, and as the machine slowly came to a full stop set Jack on the boards at Albert’s feet and turned toward the horses. The stallion threw a challenge at the man who had escaped its teeth, reared angrily, shook its black mane, and, with teeth exposed and ears laid back, prepared for another lunge. Not only Mrs. Farnshaw but every man on the ground called to Josiah Farnshaw to get out of the way of the infuriated beast. Instead of heeding the frantic warnings, Mr. Farnshaw, determined to let his onlooking neighbours see that he was not afraid, sprang forward and struck the squealing animal a stinging blow on the nose with his fist. Taken by surprise, the horse set back so suddenly that he broke the straps with which he and his mate were fastened to the reach, falling against the mare, who was thoroughly frightened by her master’s menacing blow. The team behind them reared and snorted as the stallion sprang to its feet again.

Then a strange and terrible thing happened. The horse stopped and made ready for the plunge he had in mind. There were warning cries from every man in the stackyard, but there was no chance to escape. With a scream which struck terror to the hearts of the onlookers the brute sprang upon the man and sunk its teeth through flesh and bone alike as it grabbed the arm which was aiming a puny blow, and shook him as if he were a rag, flinging him against the ground under its feet, and shaking him as a dog shakes a rat it has captured. The men could not rush in, because the other horse was on the outside of the team and was kicking and struggling to free itself from the shrieking stallion. Every team attached to the machine was tearing at its moorings, and horrified as the men were they were obliged to attempt to control the other horses. The team immediately in front of the stallion broke away altogether, carrying away with it the reach to which it was fastened. Seeing his opportunity, Joe Farnshaw rushed into the space left open by the disappearance of the other team, and with a well-directed blow from an iron bar he had snatched up, he staggered the horse so that it dropped the nerveless thing it had been shaking, and stood stunned and trembling, sight, sound, and all other matters of sense gone. The body was snatched away from in front of the tottering horse in time to save it from the heavy weight of the falling animal, which began to tremble, and then, losing control of its legs altogether, fell heavily toward the platform, dragging its mate to her knees as it went.

Elizabeth quieted her shrieking mother as best she could while she hugged her rescued child to her bosom, and the sons of Josiah Farnshaw helped the men to lay the broken body of their father upon an improvised stretcher to be removed to the house. Kind hands performed the little duties necessary on such occasions, and then the horrified men stayed on, gathered in little

groups about the dead stallion in the stackyard.

When all was done and the family were reduced to that terrorizing state of idleness which comes to those who stand about their dead, Elizabeth took Jack and wandered out of the house to where she could see Joe standing near the well. Together they glanced across to the men standing around the torn and dismantled horsepower.

“Pa was like that horse, Joe,” Elizabeth said with a sudden gleam of insight. “They were both ruled by unbridled passions. Everything they did they mixed up with hate. You couldn’t touch either of them without having them lay back their ears.”

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CHAPTER XXVIII

“TILL DEATH DO YOU PART” CONSIDERED

The day after Josiah Farnshaw was buried, Elizabeth sat down to answer John’s letter. It was not easy to do, and she sat for a long time with her chin in her hand before she began to write. The death of her father related to the things of which she must speak. She began by telling him the circumstances of her father’s death and showed him that the tragedy had been the result of pride and the habit of domination, of an unwillingness to listen to advice, or to discuss necessary matters. Her brothers had urged that the stallion be left in the barn and that another horse be substituted, since by its outcries and prancings it would keep the strange horses nervous and irritable, but Mr. Farnshaw, having said in the beginning that the animal should be used, would not listen to anything that the family wished him to do in the matter. Mrs. Farnshaw had objected to Jack being placed upon the horsepower, but once having started to place him there, her husband would listen to no caution. Last but not least of those refusals to advise with those who knew as well as he what should be done had been the one of not heeding the cries of the men who had warned him not to approach the vicious brute. To dominate had 563 been the keynote of her father’s character; his death had been a fitting symbol of his overweening desire to pursue that phantom.

After enlarging upon the causes of the tragedy, she took up the matter of the refusal to listen to necessary explanations which had had so much to do with her separation from her husband.

> Hugh Noland’s life was sacrificed because he could not go to you and talk to you of necessary things, and I am determined that if you and I ever come together again that neither of us shall be afraid to talk out anything in this whole world that is of interest to us both. Hugh and I would have been so glad to go to you and ask you to let him be taken away, or to have asked you to help us to higher living till he was well enough to go. I need hardly tell you that we both recognized that it was wronging you for him to stay on in the house after we discovered that we loved each other. Hugh planned to go, and then came the accident, and we were helpless. At last, in order not to defeat me when he saw that I was trying to overcome the fault in myself, he thought it necessary to die so that I should be free. You know, John dear, I should never try to live with you again unless I could tell you *anything* and know that you’d listen and be fair, even to my love for another man. There you have me as I am. If you don’t want me, don’t take me; but at least you are not deceived about the kind of woman you are going to live with this time.

Then Elizabeth pointed out to him how he had refused to read Hugh’s innocent letter, and then went on to consider affairs between herself and John.

> You will probably remember also that when we were talking over the coming of our second child five years ago you said that I was foolish to be disturbed about it—that if I had not had the wherewithal to feed and clothe it I might have had good cause for complaint, but otherwise not. That is another matter we must settle before we reopen life together. Mere food and clothes are but a part of a child’s natural and proper rights of inheritance. My future children—and I hope I shall have more than the one I have now—must be prepared for earnestly and rightly. We are better prepared to have children now than when we were younger, but if we wish the best from our children, we must give the best to their beginnings as well as to their upbringings, and you and I would, I am sure, come much closer to each other and begin to understand each other much better after adopting such a policy. When we were married our love would not permit us to exact conditions, but I have learned to love you and myself enough to wish to consider all the conditions of which I have been speaking before we begin to live together again.
>
> Years ago I was glibly willing to advise my mother to get a divorce—for her I am not 564 sure yet but that it was the only way to freedom—but I have lived and learned, and you see that for myself I have not wanted it. I have come to understand that you and I are bound together—not by the fact of Jack’s presence, I mean not by the mere knowledge that we have him, but by some other law of which he is but the outward evidence. No

magistrate could separate us. I belong to you and you belong to me by some primal law of life, not because some minister said over us, “Till death do you part,” but because *we have permitted ourselves to become one flesh*. Having set up these relations, let us struggle with the conditions they entail.

There must be freedom in our home if it is to be reorganized. I want you to be just as free as I am. I told you before you left that you should run the farm; I still prefer it. I don’t care what you do on it, so long as you do not mortgage it. I think I have a right to keep a certain part of it free from debt if I choose to do so, so as to be sure of a home in my old age, since I have to suffer if we lose it; otherwise you are free to do as you wish with any part of it.

I think I have a better sort of love to offer you than I had before, just because it includes a knowledge of our weaknesses. I have had to tell you all this in order that we begin square, but I liked your letter, and I believe we can come to an understanding. My love for Hugh Noland is but a memory, but when your letter came I found that my love for you was a living thing, that I wanted you very much, and even as I write you these words I want you.

When her writing was finished Elizabeth went to the barn to saddle the horses, thinking that she would take Jack with her and ride into town to mail both letters in the cool of the evening. She saddled Jack’s pony and started around the corner of the barn to tie it in the lane, when she saw, turning into that lane, John Hunter, with a valise in his hand. He had come in on the noon train and had caught a ride out home with a stranger passing that way. John saw her and waved his hand, calling to her. To Elizabeth he was still fair to look upon. She walked toward him holding out the letters she had written.

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