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A BREATH OF PRAIRIE

AND OTHER STORIES

By WILL LILLIBRIDGE

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CHICAGO



She wheeled swiftly round, confronting him. [See "Journey's End."]

A
BREATH *of* PRAIRIE
AND OTHER STORIES

BY
WILL LILLIBRIDGE
AUTHOR OF "BEN BLAIR," "THE DOMINANT DOLLAR," ETC.

WITH FIVE ILLUSTRATIONS IN COLOR
BY J. N. MARCHAND



CHICAGO
A. C. McCLURG & CO.
1911

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A TRIBUTE

It is an accepted truth, I believe, that every novelist embodies in the personalities of his heroes some of his own traits of character. Those who were intimately acquainted with William Otis Lillibridge could not fail to recognize this in a marked degree. To a casual reader, the heroes of his five novels might perhaps suggest five totally different personalities, but one who knows them well will inevitably recognize beneath the various disguises the same dominant characteristics in them all. Whether it be Ben Blair the sturdy plainsman, Bob McLeod the cripple, Dr. Watson, Darley Roberts, or even How Landor the Indian, one finds the same foundation stones of character,—repression, virility, firmness of purpose, an abhorrence of artificiality or affectation,—love of Nature and of Nature's works rather than things man-made. And these were unquestionably the pronounced traits of Will Lillibridge's personality. Markedly reserved, silent, forceful, he was seldom found in the places where men congregate, but loved rather the company of books and of the great out-doors. Living practically his entire life on the prairies it is undoubtedly true that he was greatly influenced by his environment. And certain it is that he could never have so successfully painted the various phases of prairie-life without a sympathetic, personal knowledge.

The story of his life is characteristically told in this brief autobiographical sketch, written at the request of an interested magazine.

"I was born on a farm in Union County, Iowa, near the boundary of the then Dakota Territory. Like most boys bred and raised in an atmosphere of eighteen hours of work out of twenty-four, I matured early. At twelve I was a useful citizen, at fifteen I was to all practical purposes a man,—did a man's work whatever the need. In this capacity I was alternately farmer, rancher, cattleman. Something prompted me to explore a university and I went to Iowa, where for six years I vibrated between the collegiate, dental, and medical departments. After graduating from the dental in 1898 I drifted to Sioux Falls and began to practise my profession. As the years passed the roots sank deeper and I am still here.

"Work? My writing is done entirely at night. The waiting-room,—the plum-tree,—requires vigorous shaking in the daytime. After dinner,—I have a den, telephone-proof, piano-proof, friend-proof. What transpires therein no one knows because no one has ever seen.

"Recreation? I have a mania, by no means always gratified,—to be out of doors. Once each summer 'the Lady' and I go somewhere for a time,—and forget it absolutely. In this way we've been able to travel a bit. We,—again 'the Lady' and I,—steal an hour when we can, and drive a gasoline car, keeping within the speed laws when necessary. Once each Fall, when the first frost shrivels the corn-stalk and when, if you chance to be out of doors after dark you hear, away up overhead, invisible, the accelerating, throbbing, diminishing purr of wings that drives the sportsman mad,—the town knows me no more."

Every novel may have a happy close, but a real life's story has but one inevitable ending,—Death.

And to "the Lady" has been left the sorrowful task of writing "Finis" across the final page.

January 29, 1909, he died at his home in Sioux Falls after a brief illness. But thirty-one years of age, he had won a place in literature so gratifying that one might well rest content with a recital of his accomplishments. But his youth suggests a tale that is only partly told and the conjecture naturally arises,—"What success might he not have won?" Five novels, "Ben Blair," "Where the Trail Divides," "The Dissolving Circle," "The Quest Eternal," and "The Dominant Dollar," besides magazine articles, and a number of short stories (many of them appearing in this volume) were all written in the space of eight years' time, and, as he said, were entirely produced after nightfall.

While interested naturally in the many phases of his life,—as a professional man, as an author, as the chief factor in the domestic drama,—yet most of all it pleases me to remember him as he appeared when under the spell of the prairies he loved so well. Tramping the fields in search of prairie-chicken or quail, a patient watcher in the rushes of a duck-pond, or merely lying flat on his back in the sunshine,—he was a being transformed. For he had in him much of the primitive man and his whole nature responded to the "call of the wild." But you who know his prairie-tales must have read between the lines,—for who, unless he loved the "honk" of the wild geese, could write, "to those who have heard it year by year it is the sweetest, most insistent of music. It is the spirit of the wild, of magnificent distances, of freedom impersonate"?

To the late Mrs. Wilbur Teeters I am indebted for the following tribute, which appeared in the "Iowa Alumnus."

"Dr. Lillibridge's field of romance was his own. Others have told of the Western mountains and pictured the great desert of the Southwest, but none has painted with so masterful a hand the great prairies of the Northwest, shown the lavish hand with which Nature pours out her gifts upon the pioneer, and again the calm cruelty with which she effaces him. In the midst of these scenes his actors played their parts and there he played his own part, clean in life and thought, a man to the last, slipping away upon the wings of the great storm which had just swept over his much-loved land, wrapped in the snowy mantle of his own prairies."

EDITH KELLER-LILLIBRIDGE

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ILLUSTRATIONS

She wheeled swiftly round, confronting him.

They saw the hands which had gone to hips flash up and forward like pistons, and two puffs of smoke like escaping steam.

"You'll apologize."

The two men went East together.

He heard a voice ... and glanced back.

Frontispiece

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A BREATH OF PRAIRIE
AND OTHER STORIES

A BREATH OF PRAIRIE

I

Dense darkness of early morning wrapped all things within and without a square, story-and-a-half prairie farm-house. Silence, all-pervading, dense as the darkness, its companion, needed but a human ear to become painfully noticeable.

Up-stairs in the half-story attic was Life. From one corner of the room deep, regular breathing marked the unvarying time of healthy physical life asleep. Nearby a clock beat loud automatic time, with a brassy resonance--healthy mechanical life awake. Man and machine, side by side, punctuated the passage of time.

Alone in the darkness the mechanical mind of the clock conceived a bit of fiendish pleasantry. With violent, shocking clamor, its deafening alarm suddenly shattered the stillness.

The two victims of the outrage sat up in bed and blinked sleepily at the dark. The younger, in a voice of wrath, relieved his feelings with a vigorously expressed opinion of the applied uses of things in general, and of alarm-clocks and milk pans in particular. He thereupon yawned prodigiously, and promptly began snoring away again, as though nothing had interrupted.

The other man made one final effort, and came down hard upon the middle of the floor. Rough it was, uncarpeted, cold with the damp chill of early morning. He groped for a match, and dressed rapidly in the dim light, his teeth chattering a diminishing accompaniment until the last piece was on.

Deep, regular breathing still came from the bed. The man listened a moment, irresolutely; then with a smile on his face he drew a feather from a pillow, and, rolling back the bed-clothes, he applied the feather's tip to the sleeper's bare soles, where experience had demonstrated it to be the most effective. Dodging the ensuing kick, he remarked simply, "I'll leave the light, Jim. Better hurry--this is going to be a busy day."

Outside, a reddish light in the sky marked east, but over all else there lay only starlight, as, lantern in hand, he swung down the frozen path. With the opening barn door there came a puff of warm animal breath. As the first rays of light entered, the stock stood up with many a sleepy groan, and bright eyes shining in the half-light swayed back and forth in the narrow stalls, while their owners waited patiently for the feed they knew was coming.

Jim, still sleepy, appeared presently; together the two went through the routine of chores, as they had done hundreds of times before. They worked mechanically, being still stiff and sore from the previous day's work, but swiftly, in the way mechanical work is sometimes done.

Side by side, with singing milk pails between their knees, Jim stopped long enough to ask, "Made up your mind yet what you'll do, Guy?"

The older brother answered without a break in the swish of milk through foam:

"No, I haven't, Jim. If it wasn't for you and father and mother and--" he diverted with a redoubled clatter of milk on tin.

"Be honest, Guy," was the reproachful caution.

"--and Faith," added the older brother simply.

The reddish glow in the east had spread and lit up the earth; so they put out the lantern, and, bending under the weight of steaming milk pails, walked single file toward the house and breakfast. Far in the distance a thin jet of steam spreading broadly in the frosty air marked the location of a threshing crew. The whistle,--thin, brassy,--spoke the one word "Come!" over miles of level prairie, to the scattered neighbors.

Four people, rough, homely, sat down to a breakfast of coarse, plain cookery, and talked of common, homely things.

"I see you didn't get so much milk as usual this morning, Jim," said the mother.

"No, the line-backed heifer kicked over a half-pailful."

"Goin' to finish shuckin' that west field this week, Guy?" asked the father.

"Yes. We'll cross over before night."

Nothing more was said. They were all hungry, and in the following silence the jangle of iron on coarse queensware, and the aspiration of beverages steaming still though undergoing the cooling medium of saucers, filled in all lulls that might otherwise have seemed to require conversation.

Not until the boys got up to go to work did the family bond draw tight enough to show. Then the mother, tenderly as a surgeon, dressed the chafed spots on her boys' hands, saying low in words

that spoke volumes, "I'll be so glad when the corn's all husked"; and the father followed them out onto the little porch to add, "Better quit early so's to hear the speakin' to-night, Guy."

"How are you feeling to-day, father?" asked the young man, in a tone he attempted to make honestly interested, but which an infinite number of repetitions had made almost automatic.

The father hesitated, and a look of sadness crept over his weathered face.

"No better, Guy." He laid his hand on the young man's shoulder, looking down into the frank blue eyes with a tenderness that made his rough features almost beautiful.

"It all depends upon you now, Guy, my boy." Unconsciously his voice took on the incomparable pathos of age displaced. "I'm out of the race," he finished simply.

The heavy, weather-painted lumber wagon turned at the farm-yard, and rumbled down a country road, bound hard as asphalt in the fall frosts. The air cut sharply at the ears of the man in the box, as he held the lines in either hand alternately, swinging its mate with vigor. The sun was just peeping from the broad lap of the prairie, casting the beauty of color and of sparkle over all things. Ahead of the wagon coveys of quail broke and ran swiftly in the track until tired, when, with a side movement the tall grass by the border absorbed them. Flocks of prairie-chickens, frightened by the clatter, sprang winging from the roadside, and together sailed away on spread wings. The man in the wagon looked about him and forgetting all else in the quick-flowing blood of morning, smiled gladly.

He stopped at the edge of the field, tying the reins loosely and building up the sideboards, gradually shorter, each above the other, pyramid-like, until they reached higher than his own head as he stood in the wagon-box. Stiff from the jolting and inactivity of the drive, he jumped out upon the uneven surface of the corn-field.

Slowly at first, as sore fingers rebelled against the roughness of husks, he began work, touching the frosty ears gingerly; then as he warmed to the task, stopping at nothing. The frost, dense, all-covering, shook from the stalks as he moved, coloring the rusty blue of his overalls white, and melting ice-cold, wet him through to the skin on arms and shoulders and knees. Swiftly, two motions to the ear, he kept up a tapping like the regular blows of a hammer, as the ears struck the sideboard. Fifteen taps to the minute, you would have counted; a goodly man's record.

This morning, though, Landers' mind was not upon his work. The vague, uncertain restlessness that marked the birth of a desire for broader things than he had known heretofore, was taking form in his brain. He himself could not have told what he wanted, what he planned; he simply felt a distaste for the things of Now; an unrest that prevented his sitting quiet; that took him up very early at morning; that made him husk more bushels of corn, and toss more bundles of grain into the self-feed of a threshing machine than any other man he knew; that kept him awake thinking at night until the discordant snores of the family sent him to bed, with the covers over his ears in self-defence.

A vague wonder that such thoughts were in his mind at all was upon him. He was the son of his parents; his life so far had been their life: why should he not be as content as they?

He could not answer, yet the distaste grew. Irresistibly he had acquired a habit of seeing unpleasant things: the meanness and the smallness of his surroundings; the uncouth furnishings of his home; the lack of grace in his parents and acquaintances; the trifling incidents that required so many hours of discussion; and in all things the absence of that sense of humor and appreciation of the lighter side of life which, from reading, he had learned to recognize.

Try as he might, he could not recollect even the faint flash of a poor pun coming originally from his parents. Was he to be as they? A feeling of intense repugnance swept over him at the thought--a repugnance unaccountable, and of which he felt much ashamed.

Self-suspicion followed. Was it well for him to read the books and think the thoughts of the past year? He could not escape except by brutally tearing himself by the roots from his parents' lives. It was all so hopelessly selfish on his part!

"True," answered the hot spirit of resentment, "but is it not right that you should think first of Self? Is not individual advancement the first law of Nature? If there is something better, why should you not secure it?"

The innate spirit of independence, the intense passion of pride and equality inborn with the true country-bred, surged warmly through his body until he fairly tingled.

Why should others have things, think thoughts, enjoy pleasures of which he was to remain in ignorance? The mood of rebellion was upon him and he swore he would be as they. Of the best the world contained, he, Guy Landers, would partake.

With the decision came an exultant consciousness of the graceful play of his own muscles in rapid action. The self-confidence of the splendid animal was his. He would work and advance himself. The world must move, and he would help. He would do things, great things, of which he and the world would be proud.

Unconsciously he worked faster and faster as thought travelled. The other wagons dropped behind, the tapping of corn ears on their sideboards making faint music in the clear air.

The sun rose swiftly, warming and drying the earth. Instead of frost the dust of weathered husks fell thickly over him. Overflowing with life and physical power, he worked through the long rows to the end, then mounted the wagon and looked around. Silently he noted the gain over the other workers, and a smile lit up the sturdy lines of his face.

Evening was approaching. The rough lumber wagon, heavily loaded from the afternoon's work, groaned loudly over the uneven ground. Instead of the east, the west was now red, glorious. High up in the sky, surrounding the glow, a part of it as well, narrow luminous sun-dogs presaged uncertain weather to follow.

Guy Landers mounted the wagon wearily, and looked ahead. The end of the two loaded corn-rows which he was robbing was in sight, and he returned doggedly to his task. The ardor of the morning had succumbed to the steady grind of physical toil, and he worked with the impassive perseverance of a machine.

Night and the stillness thereof settled fast. The world darkened so swiftly that the change could almost be distinguished. The rows ahead grew shadowy, and in their midst, by contrast, the corn-ears stood out white and distinct. The whole world seemed to draw more closely together. The low vibrant hum that marked the location of the distant threshing crew, sounded now almost as near as the voice of a friend. A flock of prairie-chickens flew low overhead, their flatly spread wings cutting the air with a sound like whips. They settled nearby, and out of the twilight came anon the confused murmur of their voices.

Landers stopped the impatient horses at the end of the field, and shook level the irregular, golden heap in the wagon-box. Slowly he drew on coat and top-coat, and mounted the full load, sitting sideways with legs hanging over the bulging wagon-box. It was dark now, but he was not alone. Other wagons were groaning homeward as well. Suddenly, thin and brassy, out of the distance came the sound of a steam whistle; and when it was again silent the hum of the thresher had ceased. From a field by the roadside, a solitary prairie-rooster gave once, twice, its lone, restless call.

The man stretched back full length on the corn bed and looked up where the stars sparkled clear and bright. It all appealed to him, and a moisture formed in his eyes. A new side to the problem of the morning came to him. These sounds--he realized now how he loved them. Verily they were a part of his life. Mid them he had been bred; of them as of food he had grown. That whistle, thin and unmusical; that elusive, indescribable call of prairie male; all these homely sounds that meant so much to him--could he leave them?

The moisture in his eyes deepened and a tightness gripped his throat. Slowly two great tears fought their way down through the dust on his face, and dropped lingeringly, one after the other amid the corn-ears.

II

The little, low, weather-white school-house stood glaring solitarily in the bright starlight, from out its setting of brown, hard-trodden prairie. Within, the assembled farmers were packed tight and regular in the seats and aisles, like kernels on an ear of corn. In the front of the room a little space had been shelled bare for the speaker, and the displaced human kernels thereto incident were scattered crouching in the narrow hall and anteroom. From without, groups of men denied admittance, thrust hairy faces in at the open windows. A row of dusty, grease-covered lamps flanked by composition metal reflectors, concentrated light upon the shelled spot, leaving the remainder of the room in variant shadow. The low murmur of suppressed conversation, accompanied by the unconscious shuffling of restless feet, sounded through the place. Becoming constantly more noticeable, an unpleasant, penetrating odor, of the unclean human animal filled the room.

Guy Landers sat on a crowded back seat, where, leaning one elbow on his knee, he shaded his eyes with his hand. On his right a big, sweaty farmer was smoking a stale pipe. The smell of the cheap, vile tobacco, bad as it was, became a welcome substitute for the odor of the man himself.

At his left were two boys of his own age, splendid, both of them, with the overflowing vitality that makes all young animals splendid. They were talking--of women. They spoke low, watching sheepishly whether any one was listening, and snickering suppressedly together.

The young man's head dropped in his hands. It all depressed him like a weight. From the depths of his soul he despised them for their vulgarity, and hated himself for so doing, for he was of their life and work akin. He shut his eyes, suffering blindly.

Consciousness returned at the sound of a strangely soft voice, and he looked up a little bewildered. A swarm of night-bugs encircled each of the greasy lamps, blindly beating out their lives against the hot chimney; but save this and the soft voice there was no other sound. The man at the right held his pipe in his hand; to the left the boys had ceased whispering; one and all were listening to the speaker with the stolid, expressionless gaze of interested animals.

Guy Landers could not have told why he had come that night. Perhaps it was in response to that gregarious instinct which prompts us all at times to mingle with a crowd; certainly he had not expected to be interested. Thus it was with almost a feeling of rebellious curiosity that he caught himself listening intently.

The speech was political, the speaker a college man. What he said was immaterial--not a listener but had heard the same arguments a dozen times before; it was the man himself that held them.

What the farmers in that dingy little room saw was a smooth-faced young man, with blue eyes set far apart and light hair that exposed the temples far back; they heard a soft voice which made them forget for a time that they were very tired--forget all else but that he was speaking.

Landers saw further: not a single man, but a type; the concrete illustration of a vague ideal he had long known. He realized as the others did not, that the speaker was merely practising on them--training, as the man himself would have said. When Landers was critically conscious, he was not deceived; yet, with this knowledge, at times he forgot and moved along with the speaker, unconsciously.

It was all deliriously intoxicating to the farmer--this first understanding glimpse of things he had before merely dreamed of--and he waited exultantly for those brief moments when he felt, sympathetically with the speaker, the keen joy of mastery in perfect art; that joy beside which no other of earth can compare, the compelling magnetism which carries another's mind irresistibly along with one's own.

The speaker finished and sat down wearily, and almost simultaneously the hairy faces left the windows. The shuffling of feet and the murmur of rough voices once more sounded through the room; again the odor of vile tobacco filled the air. Several of the older men gathered around the speaker, in turn holding his hand in a relentless grip while they struggled bravely for words to express the broadest of compliments. Young boys stood wide-eyed under their fathers' arms and looked at the college man steadily, like young calves.

The reaction was on the slender young speaker, and though the experience was new, he shook hands wearily. In spite of himself a shade of disgust crept into his face. He was not bidding for these farmers' votes, and the big sweaty men were foully odorous. He worked his way steadily out into the open air.

Landers, in response to a motive he made no attempt to explain even to himself, walked over and touched the chairman on the shoulder.

"Evening, Ross," he greeted perfunctorily. "Pretty good talk, wasn't it?" Without waiting for a reply he went on, "Suppose you're not hankering for a drive back to town to-night? I'll see that"--a swift nod toward the departing group--"he gets back home, if you wish."

Ross looked up in pleased surprise. He was tired and sleepy and only too glad to accept the suggestion.

"Thank you, Guy," he answered gratefully. "I'll do as much for you some time."

Landers waited silently until the last eulogist had lingeringly departed, leaving the bewildered speaker gazing about for the chairman.

"I'm to take you to town," said Landers, simply, as he led the way toward his wagon. He then added, as an afterthought: "If you're tired and prefer, you may stay with me to-night."

The collegian, looking up to decline, met the countryman's eye, and for the first time the two studied each other steadily.

"I will stay with you, if you please," he said in sudden change of mind.

They drove out, slowly, into the frosty night, the sound of the other wagons rattling over frozen roads coming pleasantly to their ears. Overhead countless stars lit up the earth and sky, almost as brightly as moonlight.

"I suppose you are husking corn these days," initiated the collegian, perfunctorily.

"Yes," was the short answer.

They rode on again in silence, the other wagons rumbling slowly away into the distance until their sound came only as a low humming from the frozen earth.

"Prices pretty good this season?" questioned the college man, tentatively.

Landers flashed around on him almost fiercely.

"In Heaven's name, man," he protested, "give me credit for a thought outside my work--" He paused, and his voice became natural: "--a thought such as other people have," he finished, sadly.

The two men looked steadily at each other, a multitude of conflicting emotions on the face of the collegian. He could not have been more surprised had a clothing dummy raised its voice and spoken. Landers turned away and looked out over the frosty prairie.

"I beg your pardon,"--wearily. "You're not to blame for thinking--as everybody else thinks." His companion started to interrupt but Landers raised his hand in silencing motion. "Let us be honest--with ourselves, at least," he anticipated.

"I know we of the farm are dull, and crude, and vulgar, and our thoughts are of common things. You of the other world patronize us; you practise on us as you did to-night, thinking we do not know. But some of us do, and it hurts."

The other man impulsively held out his hand; a swift apology came to his lips, but as he looked into the face before him, he felt it would be better left unsaid. Instead, he voiced the question that came uppermost to his mind.

"Why don't you leave--this--and go to school?" he asked abruptly. "You have an equal chance with the rest. We're each what we make ourselves."

Landers broke in on him quickly.

"We all like to talk of equality, but in reality we know there is none. You say 'leave' without the slightest knowledge of what in my case it means." He gave the collegian a quick look.

"I'm talking as though I'd known you all my life." A question was in his voice.

"I'm listening," said the man, simply.

"I'll tell you what it means, then. It means that I divorce myself from everything of Now; that I unlive my past life; that I leave my companionship with dumb things--horses and cattle and birds--and I love them, for they are natural. This seems childish to you; but live with them for years, more than with human beings, and you will understand.

"More than all else it means that I must become as a stranger to my family; and they depend upon me. My friends of now would not be my friends when I returned; they would be as I am to you now--a thing to be patronized."

He hesitated, and then went recklessly on:

"I've told you so much, I may as well tell you everything. On the next farm to ours there's a little, brown-eyed girl--Faith's her name--and--and--" His new-found flow of words failed, and he ended in unconscious apostrophe:

"To think of growing out of her life, and strange to my father and mother--it's all so selfish, so hideously selfish!"

"I think I understand," said the soft voice at his side.

They drove on without a word, the frost-bound road ringing under the horses' feet, the stars above smiling sympathetic indulgence at this last repetition of the old, old tale of man.

The gentle voice of the collegian broke the silence.

"You say it would be selfish to leave. Is it not right, though, and of necessity, that we think first of self?" He paused, then boldly sounded the keynote of the universe.

"Is not selfishness the first law of nature?" he asked.

Landers opened his lips to answer, but closed them without a word.

III

Brown, magnetic Fall, with her overflow of animal activity, shaded gradually into the white of lethic Winter; then in slow dissolution relinquished supremacy to the tans and mottled greens of Springtime. Unsatisfied as man, the mighty cycle of the seasons' evolution moved on until the ripe yellow of harvest and of corn-field wrote "Autumn" on the broad page of the prairies.

Of an evening in early September, Guy Landers turned out from the uncut grass of the farm-yard into the yellow, beaten dust of the country road. He walked slowly, for it was his last night on the farm, and it would be long ere he passed that way again. This was the road that led to the district school-house, and with him every inch had been familiar from childhood. As a boy he had run barefoot in its yellow dust, and paddled joyously in the soft mud of its summer showers. The rows of tall cottonwoods that bordered it on either side he had helped plant, watching them grow year by year, as he himself had grown, until now the whispering of prairie night winds in their loosely hung leaves spoke a language as familiar as his native tongue.

He walked down the road for a half-mile, and turned in between still other tall cottonwoods at another weather-stained, square farm-house, scarcely distinguishable from his own.

"Evening, Mr. Baker." He nodded to the round-shouldered man who sat smoking on the doorstep.

The farmer moved to one side, making generous room beside him.

"Evening, Guy," he echoed. "Won't y' set down?"

"Not to-night, Mr. Baker. I came over to see Faith." He hesitated, then added as an afterthought: "I go away to-morrow."

The man on the steps smoked silently for a minute, the glow from the corn-cob bowl emphasizing the gathering twilight. Slowly he took the pipe from his mouth, and, standing up, seized the young man's hand in the grip of a vise.

"I heerd y' were goin', Guy." He looked down through the steadiest of mild blue eyes. "Good-bye, my boy." An uncertain catch came into his voice, and he shook the hand harder than before. "We'll all miss ye."

He dropped his arm, and sat down on the step, impassively resuming his pipe. Without raising his eyes, he nodded toward the back yard.

"Faith's back there with her posies," he said.

The young man hesitated, swallowing fiercely at the lump in his throat.

"Good-bye, Mr. Baker," he faltered at length.

He walked slowly around the corner of the house, stopping a moment to pat the friendly collie that wagged his tail, welcomingly, in the path. A large mixed orchard-garden, surrounded by a row of sturdy soft maples, opened up before him; and, coming up its side path, with the most cautious of gingerly treads, was the big hired man, bearing a huge striped watermelon. He nodded in passing, and grinned with a meaning hospitality on the visitor.

At one corner of the garden an oblong mound of earth, bordered with bright stones and river-clam shells, marked the "posy" bed. Within its boundaries a collection of overgrown house

plants, belated pinks, and seeding sweet-peas, fought for life with the early fall frosts. Landers looked steadily down at the sorry little garden. Like everything else he had seen that night, it told its pathetic tale of things that had been but would be no more.

As he looked, a multitude of homely blossoms that he had plucked in the past flowered anew in his memory. The mild faces of violets and pansies, the gaudy blotches of phlox, stood out like nature. He could almost smell the heavy odor of mignonette. A mist gathered over his eyes, and again, as at the good-bye of a moment ago, the lump rose chokingly in his throat.

He turned away from the tiny, damaged bed to send a searching look around the garden.

"Faith!" he called gently.

"Faith!"--louder.

A soft little sound caught his ear from the grass-plot at the border. He started swiftly toward it, but stopped half-way, for the sound was repeated, and this time came distinctly--a bitter, half-choked sob. With a motion of weariness and of pain the man passed his hand over his eyes, then walked on firmly, his footsteps muffled in the short grass.

A dainty little figure in the plainest of calico, lay curled up on the sod beneath the big maple. Her face was buried in both arms; her whole body trembled, as she struggled hard against the great sobs.

"Faith--" interrupted the man softly, "Faith--"

The sobs became more violent.

"Go away, Guy," pleaded a tearful, muffled voice between the breaks. "Please go away, please--"

The man knelt swiftly down on the grass; irresistibly his arm spread over the dainty, trembling, little woman. Then as suddenly he drew back with a face white as moonlight, and a sound in his throat that was almost a groan.

He knelt a moment so, then touched her shoulder gently--as he would have touched earth's most sacred thing.

"Faith--" he repeated uncertainly.

The girl buried her head more deeply.

"I won't, I tell you," she cried chokingly, "I won't--" she could say no more. There were no words in her meagre vocabulary to voice her bitterness of heart.

The man got to his feet almost roughly, face and hands set like a lock. He stood a second looking passionately down at her.

"Good-bye, Faith," he said, and his trembling voice was the gentlest of caresses. He started swiftly away down the path.

The girl listened a moment to the retreating steps, then raised a tear-stained face above her arms.

"Guy!" she called chokingly, "Guy!"

The man quickened his steps at the sound, but did not turn.

The girl sprang to her feet.

"Oh, Guy! Guy!" pleadingly, desperately. "Guy!"

The man had reached the open. With a motion that was almost insane, he clapped his hands over his ears, and ran blindly down the dusty path until he was tired, then dropped hopelessly by the roadside.

Overhead the big cottonwoods whispered softly in the starlight, and a solitary catbird sang its lonely night song.

The man flung his arms around the big, friendly tree, and sobbed wildly--as the girl had sobbed.

"Oh, Faith!" he groaned.

IV

A month had passed by, bringing to Guy Landers a new Heaven and a new earth. Already the prosy old university town had begun to assume an atmosphere of home. The well-clipped campus, with its huge oaks and its limestone walks, had taken on the familiar possessive plural "our campus," and the solitary red squirrel which sported fearlessly in its midst had likewise become "our squirrel." The imposing, dignified college buildings had ceased to elicit open-mouthed observance, and among the student-body surnames had yielded precedence to Christian names--oftener, though, to some outlandish sobriquet which satirized an idiosyncrasy of temperament or outward aspect.

Meantime the farmer had learned many things. Prominent among these was a conception of the preponderant amount he had yet to learn. Another matter of illumination involved the relation of clothes to man. He had been reared in the delusion that the person who gave thought to that which he wore, must necessarily think of nothing else. Very confusing, therefore, was the experience of having representatives of this same class immeasurably outdistance him in the quiz room.

Again, on the athletic field he saw men of much lighter weight excel him in a way that made his face burn with a redness not of physical exertion. It was a wholesome lesson that he was learning--that there are everywhere scores of others, equally or better fitted by Nature for the struggle of life than oneself, and who can only be surpassed by the indomitable application and determination that wins all things.

Landers' nature though was that of the born combatant. The class that laughed openly at his first tremblingly bashful, and ludicrously inapt answer at quiz, was indelibly photographed upon his memory.

"Before this session is complete--" he challenged softly to himself, and glared at those members nearest him in a way that made them suddenly forget the humor of the situation.

But youth is ever tractable, and even this short time had accomplished much. Already the warm, contagious, college comradeship possessed him. Violent attacks of homesickness that made gray the brightest fall days, like the callous spots on his palms, were becoming more rare. The old existence was already a dream, as yet a little sad, but none the less a thing without a substance. The new life was a warm, magnetic reality; the future glowed bright with limitless promise.

"The first day of the second month," remarked Landers, meeting a fellow-classman on the way to college hall one morning.

"Yes, an auspicious time to quit--this," completed the student with a suggestive shuffle of his feet. "We've furnished our share of amusement."

Landers looked up questioningly.

"Is that from the class president?" he asked.

"Yes," answered the other, "hadn't you heard? No more dancing, 'his nibs' says."

They had reached the entrance to the big college building, and at that moment a great roar of voices sounded from out the second-floor windows. Simultaneously the two freshmen quickened their pace.

"The fun's on," commented Landers' informant excitedly, as together they broke for the lecture-room, two stairs at the jump.

The large department amphitheatre opened up like a fan--the handle in the centre of the building on the entrance floor, the spread edge, nearly a complete half-circle, marked by the boundary walls of the building, a full story higher. The intervening space, at an inclination of thirty odd degrees, was a field of seats, cut into three equal parts by two aisles that ran from the entrance, divergently upward. The small space at the entrance--popularly dubbed "the pit"--was professordom's own particular region. From this point, by an unwritten law, the classes ranged themselves according to the length of their university life; the seniors at the extreme apex of the angle, the other classes respectively above, leaving the freshmen far beyond in space.

As guardians of the two narrow aisles, the seniors dealt lightly with juniors and "sophs," but demanded insatiable toll of every freshman before he was allowed to ascend.

That a first-year man must dance was irrevocable. It had the authority of precedent in uncounted graduate classes. To be sure, it was neither required nor expected that all applicants be masters of the art; but, agitate his feet in some manner, every able-bodied male member must, or remain forever a freshman.

When Landers and his companion arrived at the top of the stairs they found the hall packed close with fellow-classmates. The lower rows of seats were already filled with triumphant seniors, waiting for the throng that crowded pit and lobby to come within their reach. With regular tapping of feet and clapping of hands in unison, the class as one man beat the steady time of one who marches.

"Dance, freshies!" they repeated monotonously. "Dance!"

"Clear the pit for a rush," yelled the president of the besieging freshmen, elbowing his way back into the mass.

A lull fell upon the room, as both sides gathered themselves together.

"Now--all at once!" yelled the president, and pandemonium broke loose.

"Rush 'em! Shove, behind there!" shrieked the struggling freshmen at the front.

"Dance, freshies! Dance!" challenged the seniors, as they locked arms across the narrow aisle.

"Hold 'em, fellows! Hold 'em!" encouraged the men of the upper seats, bracing themselves against the broad backs below.

The classes met like water against a wall. To go up was impossible; advantage of gravity and of position was all with the seniors. For an instant, at the centre, there were frantic yelling and pulling of loose wearing apparel; then, packed like cotton in a bale, they could only scream for mercy.

"Loosen up, back there! Back!" they panted, squirming impotently as they gasped for breath.

Slowly the reaction came amid the triumphant, "Dance, freshies!" of the conquering hosts.

The jam loosened; the seniors' opportunity came. Like a big machine, the occupants of the front row leaned forward, and seized upon a circle of unsuspecting, retreating freshmen, among the

number the class president.

"Pass 'em up! Pass 'em up!" insisted the men above, reaching out eager hands to aid; and with an irresistibility that seemed miraculous, the squirming, kicking, struggling freshmen found themselves rolling upward--head foremost, feet foremost, position unclassified--over the heads of the upper classmen; bumping against seats, and scattering the contents of their pockets loosely along the way.

"Up with them," repeated the denizens of the front row as they reached forward for a fresh supply.

But there was no more material available; the besieging party had retreated. On the top row the dishevelled president was confusedly pulling himself together, and grinning sheepishly. The rebellion was over.

"Dance, freshies," resumed the seniors mockingly; and once more the regular tap of feet and clapping of hands beat slow march-time.

One by one the freshmen came forward, and, shuffling a few steps to the encouraging "well done" of the seniors, mounted the steps between the rows of laughing upper classmen.

It happened that Landers came last. He wore heavy shoes and walked with an undeniable clump.

"He's Dutch, make him clog," called a man from an upper row.

The class caught the cry. "Clog! Clog!" they commanded.

A big fellow next the aisle made an addition. "Clog there, hayseed," he grumbled.

Landers stopped as though the words were a blow. That one word "hayseed" with all that it meant to him--to be thrown at him now, tauntingly, before the whole class! His face grew white beneath the remaining coat of tan, and he stepped up to the big senior with a swiftness of which no one would have suspected him capable.

"Take that back!" he blazed into the man's face.

The senior hesitated; the room grew breathlessly quiet.

"Take it back, I say!"

The big fellow tried to laugh, but his voice only grated.

"Damned if I will--hayseed," he retorted with a meaning pause and accent.

Before the words were out of his mouth Landers had the man by the collar, and they were fighting like cats.

For a time things in that pit were very confused and very noisy. Both students were big and both were furiously angry. By rule they would have been very evenly matched, but in a rough-and-tumble scrimmage there was no comparison. The classes made silent and neutral spectators, as Landers swung the man around in the narrow pit like a whirlwind, and finally pushed him back into his seat.

"Now will you take it back!" he roared breathlessly, vigorously shaking his victim.

The hot lust of battle was upon the farmer, and he forgot that several hundred students were watching his every motion.

"Take it back," he repeated, "or I'll--" and he lifted the man half out of the seat.

The senior seized both arms of the chair, and looked up in a dazed sort of way.

"I--" he began weakly.

"Louder--" interrupted Landers.

"I--beg your pardon," said the reluctant, trembling voice.

That instant the amphitheatre went wild. "Bravo!" yelled a hundred voices over the clamor of cheering hands.

"Three cheers for the freshman!" shrilled a voice over the tumult; and the "rah, rah, rah" that followed made the skylight rattle.

Landers stepped back and looked up bewildered; then a realization of the thing came to him and his face burned as no sun could make it burn, and his knees grew weak. He gladly would have given all his present earthly belongings, and all in prospect for the immediate future for a kindly earth to open suddenly and swallow him. Perspiration stood out on his face as he went slowly up the stairs, at every step a row of friendly hands grasping him in congratulation.

Slowly the room became quiet. The whole confusion had not taken up even the time of grace at the beginning of the hour; and a great burst of applause greeted the mild old dean as he came absently in, as was his wont, at the tap of the ten-minute bell. He looked up innocently at the unusual greeting, and the cheer was repeated with interest. As first in authority he was supposed to report all such inter-class offences; but in effect he invariably happened to be conveniently absent at such times--the times of the freshman rebellion. He began lecturing now without a word of comment, and on the instant the peaceful scratching of fountain pens on notebooks replaced the clamors of war.

The lecture was about half over when there was a tap on the entrance door; and the white-

haired dean, answering, stepped out into the hall. In a second he returned carrying a thin, yellow envelope.

"A message for--," he studied the writing with near-sighted eyes, "--for Guy Landers," he announced slowly.

The message went up the incline, hand over hand toward the top row, and the boy who waited felt the room growing gradually close and dark. To him a telegram could mean but one thing.

The class sat watching silently until they saw him take the paper from his neighbor; then in kindness they turned away at the look on his face. In the pit below the mild old dean began talking absently.

Landers tried to open the envelope, but his nervous hands rebelled. He laid the broad side firmly against his knee and tore open the end raggedly, drawing out the inclosed sheet with a trembling rustle that could be heard all over the room.

The open page was before him; but the letters only danced before his eyes. He spread the paper as before, flat upon his knee, ere he could read.

The one short line, the line of which every word was as he expected, stood clear before him. He felt now a vague sort of wonder that the brief, picked sentences should have affected him as they had. He had already known what they told for so long--ever since his name was spoken at the door--ages ago. He looked hesitatingly around the room. Several students were scrutinizing him curiously, as though expecting something. Oh, yes--that recalled him. He must go--home. He hated to interrupt the lecture, but he must. He got up unsteadily, and started down the stair, groping his way uncertainly, as a man walks in the dark.

The kind old dean waited in silence until Landers had passed hesitatingly through the door; then followed him out into the hall. A moment, and he returned, standing abstractedly by the lecture table. He picked up his scattered notes absently, shaking the ends even with a painstaking hand; then as carefully scattered them as before. He looked up at the silent, waiting class, and those who were near saw the tears sparkling in the mild old eyes.

"Landers' father is dead," came the simple, hushed announcement.

V

The bright afternoon sun of late October shone slantingly on the train of weathered wagons that stretched out like an uncoiling spring from the group collected in front of the little farm-house. From near and afar the neighbors had gathered; and now, falling slowly into line, they formed a chain a full quarter-mile in length.

Guy Landers was glad that at last it was over and they were out in the sunshine once more. He turned into the carefully reserved place at the head of the procession with almost a sense of relief. He was tired, fiercely tired, of the well-meant but insistent pity which dogged him with a tenacity that drove him desperate. They would not even allow him to think.

He rode alone on the front seat of the open wagon. Behind him, his mother and Jim sat stiffly, hand in hand. They gazed dully at the black thing ahead, and sobbed softly, now singly, now together. Both--himself as well--were dressed in complete black; old musty black, gotten out of the dark, hurriedly, and with the close smell of the closet still upon it. Even the horses conformed to the sober shade. They had been supplied by a neighbor on account of their sombre color.

A heavy black tassel swung back and forth with the motion of the uneven road just ahead of the horses' heads, and Landers sat watching it idly. He even caught himself counting the vibrations, as though it were a pendulum, dividing the beats into minutes. Very slow time it was; but somehow it did not surprise him. It all conformed so perfectly with the brown, quiet prairie, and the sun shining, slanting and sleepy.

The swinging tassel grew indistinct, and the *patter, patter, patter* of the teams behind came as from a distance. He closed his eyes, and the events of the past two days drifted through his mind. Already they seemed indistinct, as a dream. He wondered dully that they could be true and yet seem so foreign to his life, now. He even began to doubt their verity, and opened his eyes slowly, half expecting to see the cool, green campus, and the big college buildings. The slanting sunlight met him full in the face, and the black pendant swung monotonously, from side to side, as before. He wearily closed his eyes again.

Only two days since he had heard the taunting "Dance, freshy!" of the seniors, and felt the mighty rush of the freshman hosts; since the "rah, rah, Landers!" had shook the old amphitheatre and the dozens of welcoming hands had greeted him; and then--the darkness--the hesitating leave-taking of the building, and the lingering walk across the deserted campus toward his room--the walk he knew so well he would take no more. A brief time of waiting--a blank--and then the bitter, thumping ride across two States toward his home, when he could only think, and think, and try to adjust himself--and fail; and at last the end. And again, at the little station, when he felt the touch of his mother's hand, and heard her choking "Guy, my boy--" that spoke so much of love and of trust; when he heard his own voice answering cheerily, with a firmness which surprised him even then, speaking that which all through the long ride he had known he must speak--but could not: "It's all right, mother; don't worry; I'll not leave you again!"--it all came back to him now, and he lived it over again and again.

The big, black tassel danced tantalizingly in front of him. Yes, he had said that he would never

leave again. He dully repeated the words now to himself: "never again." It was so fitting; quite in accordance with the rest of the black pageant. His dream of life, his new-felt ambitions--all were dead, dead, like his father before him, where the black plume nodded.

They passed up through the little town and the shop-keepers came out to look. Some were in their shirt sleeves; the butcher had his white apron tucked up around his belt. They gathered together in twos and groups, nodding toward the procession, their lips moving as in pantomime. One man walked out to the crossing, counting aloud as the teams went by. "One, two, three, four, five, six--" he intoned. To him it was all a thing to amuse, like a circus parade,--interesting in proportion to its length.

Landers looked almost curiously at the stolid shopmen. It required no flush of inspiration to tell him that but a few years of this life were necessary to make him as impassive as they. He who had sworn to make the world move would be contentedly sitting on an empty goods box, diligently numbering a passing procession!

The biting humor of the thought appealed to him. He smiled grimly to himself.

VI

Once more on an early evening, a man turned out from a weather-stained prairie farm-house, through the frosted grass, arriving presently at the dusty public road. As before, he walked slowly along between the tall cottonwoods; but not, as on a memorable former occasion, because it would be for the last time. He was tired, tired with that absolute abandon of youth that sees no hope in the future, and has no philosophy to support it. Only thirty odd days since he went that way before! That many years would not add more to his life in the future.

Unconsciously he searched along the way for the landmarks he had watched with so much interest the past summer. He found the nest where the quail had reared their brood, empty now, and covered thick with the scattered dust of passing teams. Forgetful that he was weary he climbed well up the bole of a shaggy old friend, to peep in at the opening of a deserted woodpecker's home. He came to the big tree at whose roots, on that other night he remembered so well, he had thrown himself hopelessly. With a stolid sort of curiosity he looked down at the spot. Yes, there was the place. A few fallen leaves were scattered upon the earth where his body had pressed tightly against the tree-trunk, and there were the hollows where his clenched hands had found hold. A dull rebellion crept over him as he looked. It had been needless to torture him so!

He came in sight of the familiar little farm-house and turned in slowly at the break between the trees. It was growing dark now, but the odor of tobacco was on the air, and looking closely, he could catch the gleam from a glowing pipe-bowl in the doorway. He passed his hand across his brow, almost doubting--it was all so like--before--

A light step came tapping quickly down the pathway toward him. "Guy!" a voice called softly. "Guy, is that you?"

The voice was quite near him now, and he stopped short, a big maple above him.

"Yes, Faith."

She came up close, peering into the shadow.

"Guy--" she repeated, "Guy, where are you?"

He reached out and clasped her hand; then again, and took both hands. Her breath came quickly. Slowly his arm slipped about her waist, she struggling a little against her own will; then her head fell forward on his breast, and he could feel her whole body tremble.

The man looked out through the rifts in the half-naked trees; into the sky, clear and sparkling beyond; on his face an expression of sadness, of joy, of abandon--all blended indescribably.

Two soft arms crept gently about his neck, and a mass of fluffy hair caressed his face.

"Oh! Guy! Guy!" sobbed the girl, "it's wicked, I know, but I'm so glad--so glad--"

THE DOMINANT IMPULSE

I

Calmar Bye was a writer. That is to say, writing was his vocation and his recreation as well.

As yet, unfortunately, he had been unable to find publishers; but for that deficiency no reasonable person could hold him responsible. He had tried them all--and repeatedly. A certain expressman now smiled when he saw the long, slim figure approaching with a package under his arm, which from frequent reappearances had become easily recognizable; but as a person becomes accustomed to a physical deformity, Calmar Bye had ceased to notice banter.

Of but one thing in his life he was positively certain; and that was if Nature had fashioned him

for any purpose in particular, it was to do the very thing he was doing now. The reason for this certainty was that he could do nothing else with even moderate satisfaction. He had tried, frequently, to break away, and had even succeeded for a month at a time in an endeavor to avoid writing a word; but inevitably there came a relapse and a more desperate debauch in literature. Try as he might he could not avoid the temptation. An incident, a trifle out of the ordinary in his commonplace life, a sudden thrill at the reading of another man's story, a night of insomnia, and resolution was in tatters, and shortly thereafter Calmar Bye's pencil would be coursing with redoubled vigor over a sheet of virgin paper.

To be sure, Calmar did other things besides write. Being a normal man with a normal appetite, he could not successfully evade the demands of animal existence, and when his finances became unbearably low, he would proceed to their improvement by whatever means came first to hand. Book-keeping, clerical work, stenography--anything was grist for his mill at such times, and for a period he would work without rest. No better assistant could be found anywhere--until he had satisfied his few creditors and established a small surplus of his own. Then, presto, change!--and on the surface reappeared Bye, the long, slender, blue-eyed, dreaming, dawdling, irresponsible writer.

Being what he was, the tenor of Calmar's life was markedly uneven. At times the lust to write, the spirit of inspiration, as he would have explained to himself in the privacy of his own study, would come upon him strong, and for hours or days life would be a joyous thing, his fellow-men dear brothers of a happy family, the obvious unhappiness and injustice about him not reality, but mere comedy being enacted for his particular delectation.

Then at last, his work finished, would come inevitable reaction. The product of his hand and brain, completed, seemed inadequate and commonplace. He would smile grimly as with dogged persistence he started this latest child of his fancy out along the trail so thickly bestrewn with the skeletons of elder offspring. In measure, as badinage had previously passed him harmlessly by, it now cut deeply. No one in the entire town thought him a more complete failure than he considered himself. Skies, from being sunny, grew suddenly sodden; not a tenement or alley but thrust obtrusively forward its tale of misery.

"Think of me," he confided to his friend Bob Wilson one evening as during his transit through a particularly dismal slough of despond they in company were busily engaged in blazing the trail with empty bottles; "One such as I, a man of thirty and of good health, without a dollar or the prospect of a dollar, an income or the prospect of an income, a home or the prospect of a home, following a cold scent like the one I am now on!" He snapped his finger against the rim of his thin drinking glass until it rang merrily.

"The idea, again, of a man such as I, untravelled, penniless, self-educated, thinking to compete with others who journey the world over to secure material, and who have spent a fortune in preparation for this particular work." He excitedly drained the contents of the glass.

"It's preposterous, childlike!"--he brought the frail trifle down to the table with an emphasis which was all but its destruction--"imbecile! I tell you I'm going to quit.

"Quit for good," he repeated at the expression on the other's face.

Bob Wilson scrutinized his companion with a critical eye.

"Waiter," he said, speaking over his shoulder, "waiter, kindly tax our credit further to the extent of a couple of Havanas."

"Yes, sah," acknowledged the waiter.

Silence fell; but Bob's observation of his friend continued.

"So you are going to quit the fight?" he commented at last.

"I am,"--decidedly.

Wilson lit his cigar.

"You have completed that latest--production on which you were engaged, I suppose?"

The writer scratched a match.

"This afternoon."

"And sent it on?"

A nod. "Yes, on to the furnace room."

A smile which approached a grin formed over Bob's big face.

"You have hope of its acceptance, I trust?"

Calmar Bye blew a cloud of smoke far toward the ceiling, and the smile, a shade grim, was reflected.

"More than hope," laconically. "I have certainty at last."

Another pause followed and slowly the smile vanished from the faces of both.

"Bob," and the long Calmar straightened in his chair, "I've been an ass. It's all apparent, too apparent, now. I've tried to compete with the entire world, and I'm too small. It's enough for me to work against local competition." He meditatively flicked the ash from his cigar with his little finger.

"I realize that a lot of my friends--women friends particularly--will say they always knew I had

no determination, wouldn't stay in the game until I won. They're all alike in this one particular, Bob; all sticklers for the big lower jaw.

"But I don't care. I've been shooting into a covey of publishers for twelve years and never have touched a feather. Perseverance is a good quality, but there is such a thing as insanity." He stared unconsciously at the portieres of the booth.

"Once and for all, I tell you I'm through," he repeated.

"What are you going at?" queried Bob, sympathetically, a shade quizzically.

The long Calmar reached into his pocket with deliberation.

"Read that." He tossed a letter across the tiny table.

Bob poised the epistle in his hand gingerly.

"South Dakota," he commented, as he observed the postmark. "Humph, I can't make out the town."

"It's not a town at all, only a postoffice. Immaterial anyway," explained Calmar, irritably.

The round-faced man unfolded the letter slowly and read aloud:--

"MY DEAR SIR:--

"Your request, coming from a stranger, is rather unusual; but if you really mean business, I will say this: Provided you're willing to take hold and stay right with me, I'll take you in and at the end of a half-year pay \$75.00 per month. You can then put into the common fund whatever part of your savings you wish and have a proportionate interest in the herd. Permit me to observe, however, that you will find your surroundings somewhat different from those amid which you are living at present, and I should advise you to consider carefully before you make the change.

"Very truly yours,
"E. J. DOUGLASS."

Bob slowly folded the sheet, and tossed it back.

"In what particular portion of that desert, if I may ask, does your new employer reside?" There was uncertainty in the speaker's voice, as of one who spoke of India or the islands of the Pacific. "Likewise--pardon my ignorance--is that herd he mentions--buffalo?"

Calmar imperturbably returned the letter to his pocket.

"I'm serious, Robert. Douglass is a cattle man west of the river."

"The river!" apostrophized Bob. "The man juggles with mysteries. What river, pray?"

"The Missouri, of course. Didn't you ever study geography?"

"I beg your pardon," in humble apology. "Is that," vaguely, "what they call the Bad Lands?"

Bye looked across at his friend, of a mind to be indignant; then his good-nature triumphed.

"No, it's not so bad as that," with a feeble attempt at a pun. He paused to light a cigar, and absent-minded as usual, continued in digression.

"I've dangled long enough, old man; too long. I'm going to do something now. I start tomorrow."

Bob Wilson the skeptic, looked at his friend again critically. Resolutions of reconstruction he had heard before--and later watched their downfall; but this time somehow there was a new element introduced. Perhaps, after all--

"Waiter," he called, "we'll trifle with another quart of extra-dry, if you please."

"To your success," he added to his companion across the table, when the waiter had returned from his mission.

II

A year passed around, as years have a way of doing, and found Calmar Bye, the city man, metamorphosed indeed. Bronzed, bearded, corduroy-clothed, cigarette-smoking,--for cigars fifty miles from a railroad are a curiosity,--as the seasons are dissimilar, so was he unlike his former inconsequent self. In his every action now was a directness and a purpose of which he had not even a conception in his former existence.

Very, very thin upon us all is the veneer of civilization; very, very swift is the reversion to the primitive when opportunity presents. Only twelve short months and this man, end product of civilization, doer of nothing practical, dreamer of dreams and recorder of fancies, had become a positive force, a contributor to the world's food supply, a producer of meat. What a satire, in a period of time of which the shifting seasons could be counted upon one hand, to have vibrated from manuscript to beef, and for the change to be seemingly unalterable!

To be sure there had been a struggle; a period of travail while readjustment was being established; a desperate sense of homesickness at first view of the undulating, grass-covered, horizon-bounded prairies; an insatiable need of the shops, the theatres, the telephones, the *cafés*, the newspapers, all of which previously had constituted everything that made life worth living. But these emotions had passed away. What involvement of civilization could equal the beauty of a dew-scented, sun-sparkling prairie morning, or the grandeur of a soundless, star-

dotted prairie night, wherein the very limitlessness of things, their immensity, was a never ending source of wonder? Verily, all changes and conditions of life have their compensations.

Calmar Bye, the one time listless, had learned many things in this unheard-of world.

First of all, most insistent of all, he was impressed with the overwhelming predominance of the physical over the mental. Later, in practical knowledge, he grew inured to the "feel" of a native bucking broncho and the sound of mocking, human laughter after a stunning fall; in direct evolution, the method of throwing a steer and the odor of burnt hair and hide which followed the puff of smoke where the branding iron touched ceased to be cruel.

Last of all, highest evolvment of all, came the absorption of revolver-lore under the instruction of experts who made but pastime of picking a jack-rabbit in its flight, or bringing a kite, soaring high in air, tumbling precipitate to earth. A wild life it was and a rough, but fascinating nevertheless in its demonstration of the overwhelming superiority of man, the animal, in nerve and endurance over every other live thing on earth.

At the end of the year, with the hand of winter again pressed firmly upon the land, it seemed time could do no more; that the adaptation of the exotic to his new surroundings was complete. Already the past life seemed a thing interesting but aloof from reality, like the fantastic exploits of a hero of fiction, and the present, the insistent active, vital present, the sole consideration of importance.

In the appreciation of the stoic indifference of the then West it was a slight incident which overthrew. One cowboy, "Slim" Rawley, had a particularly vicious broncho, which none but he had ever been able to control, and which in consequence, he prized as the apple of his eye. During his temporary absence from the ranch one day a *confrère*, "Stiff" Warwick, had, in a spirit of bravado, roped the "devil" and instituted a contest of wills. The pony was stubborn, the man likewise, and a battle royal followed. As a buzzard scents carrion, other cowboys anticipated sport, and a group soon gathered. Ere minutes had passed the blood of the belligerents was up, and they were battling as for life, with a dogged determination which would have lasted upon the part of either, the man or the beast, until death. Rough scenes and inhuman, Bye had witnessed until *blasé*; but nothing before like this. The man used quirt, rowel, and profanity like a fiend. The pony, panting, quivering, bucking, struggling, covered with foam and streaming with blood, shrilled with the impotent anger of a demon. Even the impassive cowboy spectators from chaffing lapsed into silence.

Of a sudden, loping easily over the frost-bound prairie and following the winding trail of a cowpath, appeared the approaching figure of a horse and rider. It came on steadily, clear to the gathered group, and stopped. An instant and the newcomer understood the scene and a curse sprang to his lips. Another instant and his own mustang was spurred in close by the strugglers. His right hand raised in air and bearing a heavy quirt, descended; not upon the broncho, but far across the cursing, devilish face of the man, its rider. Then swift as thought and simultaneously as twin machines, the hands of the intruder and of the struggling "buster" went to their hips.

The spectators held their breaths; not one stirred. Before them they saw the hands which had gone to hips flash up and forward like pistons from companion cylinders, and they saw two puffs of smoke like escaping steam.

Smoothly, as a scene in a rehearsed play, the reports mingled, the riders, scarcely ten feet apart, tottered in their saddles, and slowly, unconsciously resistant even in death, the two bodies slipped to earth.



They saw the hands which had gone to hips flash up and forward like pistons, and two puffs of smoke like escaping steam.

But there the unison ended. The mustang which "Slim" Rawley rode stood still in its tracks; but before the spectators could rush in, the "devil" broncho, relieved of the hand upon the curb, sprang away, and with the "buster's" foot caught fast in the stirrup ran squealing, kicking, crazy mad out over the prairie, dragging by its side the limp figure of its unseated enemy.

Calmar Bye watched the whole spectacle as in a dream. So swift had been the action, so fantastic the denouement, that he could not at first reconcile it all with reality. He went slowly over to the prostrate "Slim" Rawley, whom the others had laid out decently upon the ground, half expecting him to leap up and laugh in their faces; but the already stiffening figure with the fiendish scowl upon its face, was convincing.

Besides,—gods, the indifference of these men to death! The party of onlookers were already separating—one division, mounted, starting in pursuit of the escaping broncho, along the narrow trail made by the dragged man; the others impassively reconnoitring for spades and shovels, were stolidly awaiting the breaking of the lock of frost-bound earth at the hands of a big, red-shirted cowboy with a pick!

"Here, Bye," suggested one toiler, "you're an eddicated man; say a prayer er something, can't ye, before we plant old 'Slim.' He wa'nt sech a bad sort."

The tenderfoot complied, and said something—he never knew just what—as the dry clods thumped dully upon the huddled figure in the old gunny sack. What he said must have been good, for those present resisted with difficulty a disposition to applaud.

This labor complete, the cowboys scattered, miles apart, each to his division of the herd, which for better range had been distributed over a wide territory. Bye was in charge of the home bunch, and sat long after the others had left, upon the new-formed mound in the ranch dooryard.

Far over the broad, rolling prairies, as yet bare and frost-bound, the sun shone brightly. A half-mile away he could see his own herd scattered and grazing. The stillness after the sudden excitement was almost unbelievable. Minutes passed by which dragged into an hour. Over the face of the sun a faint haze began to form and, unnoticeable to one not prairie-trained, the air took on a sympathetic feel, almost of dampness. A native would have sensed a warning; but Calmar Bye, one time writer, paid no heed. An instinct of his life, one he had thought suppressed, a necessity imperative as hunger, was gathering upon him strongly—the overwhelming instinct to portray the unusual.

Under its guidance, as in a maze, he made his way into the rough, unplastered shanty. Automatically he found a pencil and collected some scraps of coarse wrapping paper. Already the opening words of the tale he had to tell were in his mind, and sitting down by the greasy pine-board table, he began to write.

Hours passed. Over the sun the haze thickened. The whole sky grew sodden, the earth a corresponding grayish hue. Now and anon puffs of wind, like sudden breaths, stirred the dull air, and the short buffalo grass trembled in anticipation. The puffs increased until their direction became definite, and at last here and there big, irregular feathers of snow drifted languidly to earth.

Within the shanty the man wrote unceasingly. Many fragments he covered and deposited, an irregular heap, at his right hand. At his left an adolescent mound of cigarette stumps grew steadily larger. A cloud of tobacco smoke over his head, driven here and there by vagrant currents of air, gathered denser and denser.

As the light failed, the writer unconsciously moved the rough table nearer and nearer the window until, blocked, it could go no farther. To one less preoccupied the grating over the uneven floor would have been startling. Once just outside the door the waiting pony neighed warningly--and again. Upon the ledge beneath the window-pane a tiny mound of snowflakes began to take form; around the shanty the rising wind mourned dismally.

The light failed by degrees, until the paper was scarcely visible, and, brought to consciousness, the man rose to light a lamp. One look about and he passed his hand over his forehead, absently. Striding to the door, he flung it wide open.

"Hell!" he muttered in complex apostrophe.

To put on hat and top-coat was the act of a moment. To release the tethered pony the work of another; then swift as a great brown shadow, out across the whitening prairie to the spot he remembered last to have seen the herd, the delinquent urged the willing broncho--only to find emptiness; not even the suggestion of a trail.

Back and forth, through miles and miles of country, in semi-circles ever widening, through a storm ever increasing and with daylight steadily diminishing, Calmar Bye searched doggedly for the departed herd; searched until at last even he, ignorant of the supreme terrors of a South Dakota blizzard, dared not remain out longer.

That he found his way back to the ranch yard was almost a miracle. As it was, groping at last in utter darkness, blinded by a sleet which cut like dull knives, and buffeted by a wind like a hurricane, more dead than alive he stumbled upon the home shanty and opening the door drew the weary broncho in after him. Man and beast were brothers on such a night.

Of the hours which followed, of moaning wind and drifting sleet, nature kindly gave him oblivion. Dead tired, he slept. And morning, crisp, smiling, cloudless, was about him when he awoke.

Rising, and scarcely stopping for a lunch, the man again sallied forth upon his search, wading through drifts blown almost firm enough to bear the pony's weight and alternate spots wind-swept bare as a floor; while all about, gorgeous as multiple rainbows, flashed mocking bright the shifting sparkle from innumerable frost crystals.

All the morning he searched, farther and farther away, until the country grew rougher and he was full ten miles from home. At last, stopping upon a small hill to reconnoitre, the searcher heard far in the distance a sound he recognized and which sent his cheek pale--the faint dying wail of a wounded steer. It came from a deep draw between two low hills, one cut into a steep ravine by converged floods and hidden by the tall surrounding weeds. Bye knew the place well and the significance of the sound he heard. In a cattle country, after a sudden blizzard, it could have but one meaning, and that the terror of all time to animals wild or domestic--the end of a stampede.

Only too soon thereafter the searcher found his herd. Upon the brow of a hill overlooking the ravine he stopped. Below him, bellowing, groaning, struggling, wounded, dying, and dead--a great mass of heavy bodies, mixed indiscriminately--bruised, broken, segmented, blood-covered, horrible, lay the observer's trust, the wealth of his employer, his own hope of regeneration, worse now than worthless carrion. And the cause of it all, the sole excuse for this delinquency, lay back there upon a greasy table in the shanty--a short scrawling tale scribbled upon a handful of scrap paper!

III

"Yes, I'm back, Bob."

The tall, thin Calmar Bye leaned back in his chair and looked listlessly about the familiar *café*, without a suggestion of emotion. It seemed to him hardly credible that he had been away from it all for a year and more. Nothing was changed. Across the room the same mirrors repeated the reflections he had observed so many times before. Nearby were the same booths and from within them came the same laughter and chatter and suppressed song. Opposite the tiny table the same man with the broad, good-natured face was making critical, smiling observation, as of yore. As ever, the look recalled the visionary to the present.

"Back for good, Bob," he repeated slowly.

The speaker's attitude was far from being that of a conquering hero returned; the sympathies of the easy-going Robert, ever responsive, were roused.

"What's the matter, old man?" he queried tentatively. "Weren't you a success as a broncho-buster?"

"A success!" Calmar Bye stroked a long, thin face with a long, thin hand. "A success!" he repeated. "I couldn't have been a worse failure, Bob." He paused a moment, smoothing the table-cloth absently with his finger tips.

"Success!" once more, bitterly. "I'm not even a mediocre at anything unless it is at what I'm doing now, dangling and helping spend the money some one else has worked all day to earn." He looked his astonished friend fair in the eyes.

"You don't know what an idiot, a worse than idiot, I've made of myself," and he began the story of the past year.

Monotonously, unemotionally he told the tale, omitting nothing, adding nothing; while about him the sounds of the restaurant, the tinkling of glassware, the ring of silver, the familiar muffled pop of extracted corks, played a soft accompaniment. Occasionally Bob would make a comment or ask explanation of something to him entirely new; but that was all until near the end,--where the delinquent herder, coming swiftly to the brow of the hill, looked down upon the scene in the ravine below. Then Bob, the care-free, the pleasure-seeking, raised a hand in swift protest.

"Don't describe it, please, old man," he requested. "I'd rather not hear."

The speaker's voice ceased; over his thin features fell the light of a queer little half-smile which, instead of declaring itself, only provoked Bob Wilson's curiosity. In the silence Bye, with a hand unaccustomed to the exercise, made the familiar gesture that brought one of the busy attendants to his side.

"And the story you wrote--?" suggested Wilson while they waited.

For answer Calmar Bye drew an envelope from his pocket and tossed it across the table to his friend. Wilson first noted that it bore the return address of one of the country's foremost magazines; he then unfolded the letter and read aloud:

"DEAR MR. BYE:--

"The receipt of your two stories, 'Storm and Stampede' and 'The Lonely Grave,' has settled a troublesome question for us, namely: What has become of Mr. Calmar Bye?

"No doubt you will recall that our criticisms of the material which you have submitted from time to time in the past, were directed chiefly against faults arising out of your unfamiliarity with your subjects. The present manuscripts bear the best testimony that you have been gathering your material at first hand. We have the feeling, as we read, that every sentence flows straight from the heart.

"Now we want just such vivid, gripping, red-blooded cross-sections of life as these, your two latest accomplishments; in fact, we can't get enough of them. Therefore, instead of making you a cash offer for these two stories, we suggest that you first call at our office at your earliest convenience. If agreeable, we should like to arrange for a series of Western stories and articles, the evolving of which should keep you engaged for some time to come.

"Cordially,
"-----"

The hands of the two friends clasped across the table. No word disturbed the silence until the forgotten waiter broke in impatiently:

"Yo' o'der, sahs?"

"Champagne"--this time it was Calmar Bye who gave it--"a quart. And be lively about it, too."

"Well, well!" Bob Wilson's admiration burst forth. "It is worth a whole herd of steers."

THE STUFF OF HEROES

Springtime on the prairies of South Dakota. It is early morning, the sun is not yet up, but all is light and even and soft and all-surrounding, so that there are no shadows. In every direction the gently rolling country is dotted brown and white from the incomplete melting of winter's snows. In the low places tiny streams of snow-water, melted yesterday, sing low under the lattice-work blanket the frost has built in the night. Nearby and in the distance prairie-chickens are calling, lonely, uncertain. Wild ducks in confused masses, mere specks in the distance, follow low over the winding curves of the river. High overhead, flocks of geese in regular black wedges, and brant, are flying northward, and the breezy sound of flapping wings and of voices calling, mingle in the sweetest of all music to those who know the prairies--Nature's morning song of springtime.

"What a country! Look there!" The big man in the front seat of the rough, low wagon pointed east where the sun rose slowly from the lap of the prairie. The other men cleared their throats as if to speak, but said nothing.

"And I've lived sixty years without knowing," continued the first voice, musingly.

"I've never been West before, either," admitted De Young, simply.

They drove on, the trickling of snow-water sounding around the wagon wheels.

The third man, Clark, pointed back in the direction they had come.

"Did any one back there inquire what we were doing?" he asked.

"A fellow 'lowed,' with a rising inflection, that we were hunting ducks," said De Young. "I temporized; made him forget that I hadn't answered. You know what will happen once the curiosity of the natives is aroused."

"I wasn't approached," Morris joined in, without turning. The corners of the big man's mouth twitched, as the suggested picture formed swiftly in his mind.

After a pause, De Young spoke again.

"I gave the postmaster a specially good tip to see that we got our mail out promptly."

"So did I," Clark admitted.

The face of the serious man lighted; and, their eyes meeting, the three friends smiled all together.

The sun rose higher, without a breath of wind from over the prairies, and one after another the men removed their top-coats. The horses' hoofs splashed at each step in slush and running water, sending drops against the dashboard with a sound like rain.

The trail which they were following could now scarcely be seen, except at intervals on higher ground, where hoof-prints and the tracks of wheels were scored in the soft mud, and with each mile these marks grew deeper and broader as the partly frozen earth softened.

The air of solemnity which had hung about the men for days, and which lifted from time to time only temporarily, now silenced them again. Indeed, had there been anybody present to observe, he doubtless would have been impressed most of all with the unwonted soberness of the wagon's occupants, a gravity strangely at variance with the rampant, fecund season.

And the object of their journeying into this unknown world was in all truth a matter for silence rather than speech; its influence was toward deep and earnest meditation, to which the joyous, awakening world could do no more than chant in a minor key a melancholy accompaniment. Never did a soldier advancing upon a breach in the enemy's breastworks more certainly confront the grinning face of Death, than did this trio in their progress across the singing prairie; but where the plaudits of the world spelled glory for the one, the three in the wagon knew that for them Death meant oblivion, extinction, a blotting out that must needs be utter and inevitable.

The thoughts of each dwelt upon some aspect of two scenes which had happened only a brief fortnight previously. There had been a notable convention of physicians in a city many miles to the east. One delegate, a man young, slender, firm of jaw, his face shining with zeal and the spirit which courts self-immolation, had addressed the body. His speech had made a profound impression--after its first effect of sensation had subsided--upon the hundreds gathered there, who hearkened amazedly; but of those hundreds only two had been moved to lay aside the tools of their calling and follow him.

And whither was he leading them? Into the Outer Darkness, each firmly believed. For them the future was spelled *nihil*; for the world, salvation--perhaps.

The inspired voice still rang in memory.

"Gentlemen, I repeat, it is a challenge.... The flag of the enemy is hung up boldly, flauntingly, in every public place.... Are we to permit this? Are we to sit idle and acknowledge ourselves beaten in the great struggle against Death? No, no, no! The Nation--yea, the whole civilized world--shrinks and shudders in terror before the sound of one dread word--*tuberculosis!*

"Our professional honor--our personal honor as well, gentlemen--is at stake. A solemn charge is laid upon us.... We must die if need be; but we must conquer this monstrous scourge, which is the single cause of more than one death in every ten."

And then, the deep silence which had marked the closing words:

"Gentlemen, I can cure consumption," came the simple declaration. "If there are those among you who value Science more than gain; who are willing to dare with me, willing to pay the extreme price, if necessary--if there are any such among you, and I believe there are, meet with me in my rooms this evening."

To the eight who accepted that invitation, Dr. De Young disclosed the details of his Great Experiment. It included, among many other things which no one but a physician can appreciate, the lending of their bodies to the Experiment's exemplification. Of the eight, two had agreed to follow him to the end. Each of the three had placed his house in order, and here they were, nearing that end, whatever it was to be.

An hour passed, and now ahead in the distance a rough shanty came into view. It was the only house in sight, and the three men knew it was to be theirs. In silence they drew up where the men were unpacking their goods.

"Good morning for ducks--saw a big flock of mallards back here in a pond," observed the man

who took their team.

The three doctors alighted without answering, and watching them, the man stroked a stubby red whisker in meditation.

"Lord, they're a frost!" he commented.

Night had come, and the stars shone early from a sky yet light and warm. In the low places the waters sang louder than before, with the increase of a day's thawing. Looking away, the white spots were smaller and the brown patches larger; otherwise, all was the same, the prairie of yesterday, of to-day, and to-morrow.

Tired with a day of settling, the three men stood in the doorway and for the first time viewed the country at night. They were not talkers at best, and now the immensity of the broad prairies held them silent. The daily struggle of life, the activity and rivalry and ambition which before to-night had seemed so great to these city-bred men, here alone with Nature and Nature's God, where none other might see, assumed their true worth. The tangled web of life loosened and many foreign things caught and held therein, fell out. Man, introspecting, saw himself at his real worth, and was not proud.

The absolute quiet, so unusual, made them wakeful, and though tired, they sat long in the doorway, smoking, thinking. Small talk seemed to them profanation, and of that which was uppermost in each man's mind, none cared first to speak. A subtle understanding, called telepathy, was making of their several minds a thing united.

"No, not to-night, it's too beautiful," said De Young at length, and the protesting voice sounded to his own ears as that of a stranger.

The men started at the sound, and the glowing tips of three cigars described partial arcs in the half light as they turned each to each. No one answered. They were face to face with fundamentals at last.

Minutes, an hour, passed. The cigars burned out, and as the pleasant odor of tobacco died away, there came the chill night air of the prairie. The two older men rose stiffly, and with a low good-night, stumbled into the darkness of the shanty.

De Young sat alone in the doorway. He realized that it was the supreme hour of his life. In his mind, memory of past and hope of future met on the battlefield of the present, and meeting, mingled in chaos. Thoughts came crowding upon each other thick--the thoughts which come to few more than once in life, to multitudes, never; the thoughts which writers in every language, during all time, have sought words to express, and in vain.

Everywhere the snow-streams sang lower and lower. A fog, dense, penetrating, born of early morning, wrapped all things about, uniting and at the same time setting apart. Shivering, he shut the door on the night and the damp, and as by instinct crept into bed. Listening in the darkness, the sound of the sleepers soothed him. Happier thoughts came, thoughts which made his heart beat more swiftly and his eyes grow tender; for he was yet young, and love untold ever dwelleth near heaven. Thus he fell asleep with a smile.

"Choose, please. We'll take our turns in the order of length," said De Young, holding up the ends of three paper strips. Each man drew, and in the silence that followed, without a word Morris turned away, preparing swiftly for the operation.

"Give me chloroform," he said, stretching himself horizontally,--adding as the others bent over him, "Inoculate deep, please. Let's not waste time."

Swiftly, with the precision of absolute knowledge, the two physicians did their work. A mist was over their eyes, so that all the room looked dim, as to old men; and hands which had not known a tremor for years, shook as they emptied the contents of the little syringe, teeming with tiny, unseen, living rods. Clark's forehead was damp with a perspiration that physical pain could not have brought, and on De Young's face, time marked those minutes as months.

It was all done with the habit of years. The two doctors carefully sterilized their instruments and replaced them in cases, then, silently, drawn nearer together than ever before, the two friends watched the return of consciousness. And Morris awakening, things real and of dreamland still confused to his senses, heard the soft voice which a legion of patients had thus heard and blessed, saying cheerily, "Wake up! wake up, my friend!"

Thus the day passed. In turn, the men, hours apart, with active brains, and eyes wide open, sent their challenges to Death--each man his own messenger.

The months slipped by. Suns became torrid hot, and cooled until it seemed there was light but not heat on earth. Days grew longer, and in unison, earth waxed greener; then in descending scale, both together waned. Migratory wings fluttering at night, and passing voices calling in the darkness--most lonely sounds of earth--gave place to singers of the day. The robin, the meadow-lark, the ubiquitous catbird, all born of prairie and of summer, came and went. Blackbirds in countless flocks followed. Again the calling of prairie-chickens was heard at eve and morning, and anon frost glistened in the air.

At last throughout the land no sound of animal voice was heard, for winter bound all things firm and white. Another cycle was complete; yet, almost ere the record could be made, there appeared, moving far in the distance, a black triangle. Passing swiftly, with the sound of wings and calling voices, there sprang anew in all things animate a mixed feeling of gladness and unrest, which was the spirit of returned spring.

Thus twice the cycle of the seasons passed, and again the sun of early spring, shining bright, set the tiny snow-streams singing. It glistened over the prairie on snow-drift and frost; it lit up the few scattered shingled roofs of settlers newly come; and shone in at the open door of a rough cabin we know, touching without pity the faces of the two men who watched its rise. Shining low, even with the prairie, it touched in vivid contrast an oblong mound of fresh earth, heaped up target distance from the cabin door.

The mound had not been there long; neither snow or rain had yet touched it; it was still strange to the men in the doorway, who saw it vividly now, at time of sunrise. Though thus early, each man sat idly smoking, an open book reversed on the knee.

De Young first broke the silence.

"We must do something, or else decide to do nothing about Clark's mail." He shifted in his seat, looking away from the open door.

"I don't know--whether--it would be kinder to tell them or not."

A coughing fit shook Morris, and answering, a twitch as of pain tightened the corners of his companion's eyes. Minutes passed, and Morris sat limply in his chair, before he answered,

"I thought at first we'd better write; now it seems different. Let's wait until we go back."

Neither of the men looked at the other. They seldom did now; it was useless pain. Filled with the incomparable optimism of the consumptive, neither man realized his own condition, but marked the days of his friend. Morris, unbelieving, spoke of his friend's return; yet, growing weaker each day himself, spoke in all hope and conviction of his future work, recording each day his mode of successful treatment, despite interruptions of coughing which left him breathless and trembling for minutes. De Young saw, and in pity marvelled; yet, seeing, and as a physician knowing, he not for a moment applied the gauge to himself.

Nature, in sportive mood, commands the Angel of Death, who with matchless legerdemain, keeps the mirror of illusion, unsuspected, before the consumptive's eyes; and, seeing, in derision the satirist smiles.

Unavoidably acting parts, the two friends found a barrier of artificiality separating them, making each happier when alone. Thus day after day, monotonous, unchanging, went by. Not another person entered their door. From the little town a man at periods brought provisions and their mail, but the house was acquiring an uncanny reputation. They were not understood, and such are ever foreign. With the passage of time and the coming of the mound in the dooryard, the feeling had developed into positive fear, and travellers avoided the place as though warned by a scarlet placard.

Morris grew weaker daily. At last the disillusionment that precedes death came to him. The artificial slipped from both men and a nearness like that of brothers, joined them. They spoke not of the future but of the past. Years slipped aside and left them back in the midst of active, brain-satisfying practice. Over again they performed operations, where life and death were separated but by a hair's width. Again, with eyes that brightened and breath that came more quickly, they lived their successes, and hand in hand, as children in the dark, told of their failures, and the tale was long, for they were but men.

The end came quietly. A hemorrhage, a big spot of blood on the cover, a firm hand pressure, and Morris's parting words,

"Save my notes."

That night De Young knew no sleep. "I must finish the work," he said, in lame excuse. Well he knew there could be no rest for him that night. He did his task thoroughly, making record of things that had passed, with the precision of a physician who knows a patient but as material.

A tramp, who, unknowing, had taken shelter in an outbuilding, waking in the night, saw the light. Moved by curiosity, he crawled up softly in the darkness, and peeped in at the window. In the half light he saw on the bed a thin, white face motionless in the expression which even he knew was death; and at the table, writing rapidly with manuscript all about, a man whose eyes shone with the brilliancy of disease, and with a face as pale as the face on the pillow. In the blank, unreasoning terror of superstition, he fled until Nature rebelled and would carry him no farther. Next day to all he saw, he told the tale of supernatural things which lingers yet around a prairie ruin, in whose dooryard are mounds built of man.

The mail carrier calling next day saw a man with spots of scarlet heightening the contrast of a face pale as death, digging in the dooryard. The man worked slowly, for he coughed often and must rest. In kindness the carrier offered help, but was refused with words that brought to the listener's eyes a moisture unknown since boyhood, and the thought of which in days that followed, kept him silent concerning what he had seen.

Summer, with the breath of warm life and the odor of growing things; with days made dreamy and thoughtful by the purring of the soft wind and the droning of insects; and nights when all was good; with stars above and crickets singing below--summer had come and was passing.

De Young could no longer deceive himself. The personal faith that had upheld him so long--when friends had failed--could fight the inevitable no longer. With eyes wide open, he saw at last clearly, and, seeing, realized the end. He cared not for death; he was too strong for that; but it must needs be that, now, with the shadow of defeat lying dark over the future, the problem of motive, the great "why," should come uppermost in his mind demanding an answer.

Once before, at the time when other men read from their lives, he caught glimpses of something beyond. Now again the mood returned, and he knew why he was as he was; that with him love was, and had been, stronger than Science and all else beside. He knew that whatever he might have done, the entering into his life of The Woman, and the knowledge that followed her coming, had inspired the supreme motive that thenceforth drove him forward. With this realization came a new life, a happier and a sadder life, in which all things underwent readjustment.

Regret came as sadness, regret that he had not told this woman all; that in his blind confidence he had not written, but had waited--waited for this. He would wait no longer. He would tell her now. A thousand new thoughts came to his mind; a thousand new feelings surged over him as a flood, and he poured them out on paper. The man himself, not the physician, was unfolded for the first time in his life, and the writing of that letter which told all, his life, his love, that ended with a good-bye which was forever, was the sweetest labor of his life. He sealed the letter and sat for hours looking at it, dreaming.

It was summer and the nights were short, so that with the writing and the dreams, morning had come. He could scarce wait that day for the carrier; time to him had become suddenly a thing most precious; and when at last the man appeared. De Young twice exacted the promise that the letter should be mailed special delivery.

The reaction was on and all the world was dark. Fool that he was, two years had passed since he had heard from her. She also was a consumptive; might not--?

The very thought was torture; perspiration started at every pore, and with the little strength that was left he paced up and down the room like a caged animal. A fit of coughing, such as he had never known before, seized him, and he dropped full length upon the bed.

The limit was reached; he slept.

As he had worked one night before to forget, so he spent the following days. It was the end, and he knew it; but he no longer cared. His future was centred on one event--the coming of a letter. Beyond that all was shadow, and he cared not to explore. He worked all that Nature would allow, carrying to completion his observations, admitting his mistake with a candor which now caused no personal pain. He spent much time at his journal, writing needless things: his actions, his very thoughts,--things which could not have been wrung from him before; but he was lonely and desperate. He must not think--'t was madness. So he wrote and wrote and wrote.

He watched for the carrier all the daylight hours. His mail was light, and the coming infrequent. There had been time for an answer, and the watcher could no longer compose himself to write. All day he sat in the doorway, looking across the two mounds, down the road whence the carrier would come.

And at last he came. Far down the road toward town one morning a familiar moving figure grew distinct. De Young watched as though fascinated. He wanted to shout, to laugh, to cry. With an effort that sent his finger nails deep into his palms, he kept quiet, waiting.

A letter was in the carrier's hand. Struck by the look on De Young's face, the postman did not turn, but stood near by watching. The exile, once the immovable, seized the missive feverishly, then paused to examine. It was a man's writing he held, and he winced as at a blow, but with a hand that was nerved too high to tremble, he tore open the envelope. He read the few words, and read again; then in a motion of weariness and hopelessness indescribable, hands and paper dropped.

"My God! And she never knew," he whispered.

When next the carrier came, he shaped the third mound.

ARCADIA IN AVERNUS

*"For they have sown the wind, and
they shall reap the whirlwind."*

CHAPTER I--PRELUDE

Silence, the silence of double doors and of padded walls was upon the private room of the downtown office. Across the littered, ink-stained desk a man and a woman faced each other. Threads of gray lightened the hair of each. Faint lines, delicate as pencillings, marked the forehead of the woman and radiated from the angles of her eyes. A deep fissure unequally separated the brows of the man, and on his shaven face another furrow added firmness to the mouth. Their eyes met squarely, without a motion from faces imperturbable in middle age and knowledge of life.

The man broke silence slowly.

"You mean," he hesitated, "what that would seem to mean?"

"Why not?" A shade of resentment was in the answering voice.

"But you're a woman--"

"Well--"

"And married--"

The note of resentment became positive. "What difference does that make?"

"It ought to." The man spoke almost mechanically. "You took oath before man and higher than man--"

The woman interrupted him shortly.

"Another took oath with me and broke it." She leaned gracefully forward in the big chair until their eyes met. "I'm no longer bound."

"But I--"

"I love you!" she interjected.

The man's eyebrows lifted.

"Love?" he inflected.

"Yes, love. What is love but good friendship--and sex?"

The man was silent.

A strong white hand slid under the woman's chin and her elbow met the desk.

"I meant what you thought," she completed slowly.

"But I cannot--"

"Why?"

"It destroys all my ideas of things. Your promise to another--"

"I say he's broken his promise to me."

"But your being a woman--"

"Why do you expect more of me because I'm a woman? Haven't I feelings, rights, as well as you who are a man?" She waited until he looked up. "I ask you again, won't you come?"

The man arose and walked slowly back and forth across the narrow room. At length he stopped by her chair.

"I cannot."

In swift motion his companion stood up facing him.

"Don't you wish to?" she challenged.

The hand of the man dropped in outward motion of deprecation.

"The question is useless. I'm human."

"Why shouldn't we do what pleases us, then?" The voice was insistent. "What is life for if not for pleasure?"

"Would it be pleasure, though? Wouldn't the future hold for us more of pain than of pleasure?"

"No, never." The words came with a slowness that meant finality. "Why need to-morrow or a year from now be different from to-day unless we make it so?"

"But it would change unconsciously. We'd think and hate ourselves."

"For what reason? Isn't it Nature that attracts us to each other and can Nature be wrong?"

"We can't always depend upon Nature," commented the man absently.

"That's an artificial argument, and you know it." A reprimand was in her voice. "If you can't depend upon Nature to tell you what is right, what other authority can you consult?"

"But Nature has been perverted," he evaded.

"Isn't it possible your judgment instead is at fault?"

"It can't be at fault, here." The voice was neutral as before. "Something tells us both it would be wrong--to do--as we want to do."

Once more they sat down facing each other, the desk between them as at first.

"Artificial convention, I tell you again." In motion graceful as nature the woman extended her hand, palm upward, on the polished desk top. "How could we be other than right? What do we mean by right, anyway? Is there any judge higher than our individual selves, and don't they tell us pleasure is the chief aim of life and as such must be right?"

The muscles at the angle of the man's jaw tightened involuntarily.

"But pleasure is not the chief end of life."

"What is, then?"

"Development--evolution."

"Evolution to what?" she insisted.

"That we cannot answer as yet. Future generations must and will give answer."

"It's for this then that you deny yourself?" A shade almost of contempt was in the questioning voice.

The taunt brought no change of expression to the man's face.

"Yes."

The woman walked over to a bookcase, and, drawing out a volume, turned the pages absently. Without reading a word, she came back and looked the man squarely in the face.

"Will denying yourself help the world to evolve?"

"I think so."

"How?"

"My determination makes me a positive force. It is my Karma for good, that makes my child stronger to do things."

"But you have no child,"--swiftly.

Their eyes met again without faltering.

"I shall have--sometime."

Silence fell upon them.

"Where were you a century ago?" digressed the woman.

"I wasn't born."

"Where will your child be a hundred years from now?"

"Dead likewise, probably; but the force for good, the Karma of the life, will be passed on and remain in the world."

Unconsciously they both rose to their feet.

"Was man always on the earth?" she asked.

The question was answered almost before spoken.

"No."

"Will he always be here?"

"Science says 'no.'"

The woman came a step forward until they almost touched.

"What then becomes of your life of denial?" she challenged.

"You make it hard for me," said the man, simply.

"But am I not right?" She came toward him passionately. "I come near you, and you start." She laid her hand on his. "I touch you, and your eyes grow warm. Both our hearts beat more quickly. Look at the sunshine! It's brighter when we're so close together. What of life? It's soon gone--and then? What of convention that says 'no'? It's but a farce that gives the same thing we ask--at the price of a few words of mummery. Our strongest instincts of nature call for each other. Why shouldn't we obey them when we wish?" She hesitated, and her voice became tender. "We would be very happy together. Won't you come?"

The man broke away almost roughly.

"Don't you know," he demanded, "it's madness for us to be talking like this? We'll be taking it seriously, and then--"

The woman made a swift gesture of protest.

"Don't. Let's be honest--with each other, at least. I'm tired of pretending to be other than I am. Why did you say 'being true to my husband'? You know it's mockery. Is it being true to live with a man I hate because man's law demands it, rather than true to you whom Nature's law sanctions? Don't speak to me of society's right and wrong! I despise it. There is no other tribunal than Nature, and Nature says 'Come.'"

The man sat down slowly and dropped his head wearily into his hands.

"I say again, I cannot. I respect you too much. We're intoxicated now being together. In an hour, after we're separate--"

She broke in on him passionately.

"Do you think a woman says what I have said on the spur of the moment? Do you think I merely happened to see you to-day, merely happened to say what I've said? You know better. This has been coming for months. I fought it hard at first; with convention, with your idea of right and wrong. Now I laugh at them both. Life is life, and short, and beyond is darkness. Think what atoms we are; and we struggle so hard. Our life that seems to us so short--and so long! A thousand, perhaps ten thousand such, end to end, and we have the life of a world. And what is that? A cycle! A thing self-created, self-destructive: then of human life--nothingness. Oh, it's humorous! Our life, a ten thousandth part of that nothingness; and so full of tiny--great struggles and worries!" She was silent a moment, her throat trembling, a multitude of expressions shifting swiftly on her face.

"Do you believe in God?" she questioned suddenly.

"I hardly know. There must be--"

"Don't you suppose, then, He's laughing at us now?" She hesitated again and then went on, almost unconsciously. "I had a dream a few nights ago." The voice was low and very soft. "It seemed I was alone in a desert place, and partial darkness was about me. I was conscious only of listening and wondering, for out of the shadow came sounds of human suffering. I waited with my heart beating strangely. Gradually the voices grew louder, until I caught the meaning of occasional words and distinctly saw coming toward me the figure of a man and a woman bearing a great burden, a load so great that both together bent beneath the weight and sweat stood thick upon their brows. The edges of the burden were very sharp so that the hands of the man and the woman bled from the wounds and their shoulders were torn grievously where the load had shifted: those of the woman more than the man, for she bore more of the weight. I marvelled at the sight.

"Suddenly an intense brightness fell about me and I saw, near and afar, other figures each bearing similar burdens. The light passed away, and I drew near the man and questioned him.

"What rough load is that you carry?" I asked.

"The burden of conventionality," answered the man, wearily and with a note of surprise in his voice.

"Why do you bear it needlessly?" I remonstrated.

"We dare not drop it," said the woman, hopelessly, "lest that light, which is the searchlight of public opinion, return, showing us different from the others."

"Even as she spoke the illumination again fell upon us, and by its brightness I saw a drop of blood gather slowly from the wounds on the woman's hand and fall into the dust at her feet."

A silence fell upon the inmates of the tiny muffled office.

"But the burden isn't useless," said the man, gently. "The condemnation of society is an hourly reality. From the patronage of others we live. The sun burns us, but we submit, for in return it gives life."

The woman arose with an abrupt movement, and looked down at him coldly.

"Are you a man, and use those arguments?" An expression akin to contempt formed about her mouth. "Are you afraid of a united voice the individuals of which you despise?"

The first hint of restrained passion was in the answering voice.

"You taunt me in safety, for you know I love you." He looked up at her unhesitatingly. "Man's law is artificial, that I know; but it's made for conditions which are artificial, and for such it's right. Were we as in the beginning, Nature's law, which beside the law of man is no law, would be right; but we're of the world as it is now. Things are as they are, and we must conform or pay the price." He hesitated. His face settled back into a mask. "And that price of non-conformity is too high," he completed steadily.

The eyes of the woman blazed and her hands tightened convulsively.

"Oh, you're frozen--fossilized, man! I called you man! You're not a man at all, but a nineteenth century machine! You're run like a motor, from a power house; by the force of conventional thought, over wires of red tape. Fie on you! I thought to meet a human being, not a lifeless thing." She looked at him steadily, her chin in the air, a world of scorn in her face. "Go on sweating beneath the useless load! Go on building your structure of artificiality that ends centuries from now in nothingness! Here's happiness to you in your empty life of self-effacement, with your machine prompted acts, years considered!" Without looking at him, one hand made scornful motion of dismissal. "Good-bye, ghost of man; I wash my hands of you."

"Wait, Eleanor!" The man sprang to his feet, the mask lifting from his face, and there stood revealed a multitude of emotions, unseen of the world, that flashed from the depths of his brown eyes and quivered in the angles of his mouth. He came quickly over and took her hand between his own.

"I'm proud of you,"--a world of tenderness was in his voice--"unspeakably proud--for I love you. I've done my best to keep us apart, yet all the time I believed with you. Nature is higher than man, and no power on earth can prove it otherwise." He looked into the softest of brown eyes, and his voice trembled. "Beside you the world is nothing. Its approval or its condemnation are things to be laughed at. With you I challenge conventionality--society--everything." He bent over her hand almost reverently and touched it softly with his lips.

"Farewell--until I come," he said.

CHAPTER II--THE LEAP

A man and a woman emerged from the dilapidated day-car as it drew up before the tiny, sanded station which marked the terminus of the railway. The man was tall, clean-shaven, quick of step and of glance. The woman was likewise tall, well-gloved, and, strange phenomenon at a country station, carried no parcels.

Though easily the centre of attention, the couple were far from being alone. On the contrary, the car and platform fairly swarmed with humanity. Men mostly composed the throng that

alighted--big, weather-stained fellows in rough jeans and denims. In the background, as spectators moved or lounged a sprinkling of others: thinner, lighter, enveloped in felt, woollen and buckskin, a fringe of heavy hair peeping out at their backs beneath the broad hat-brims. A few women were intermingled. Coarsely gowned, sun-browned, they stood; themselves like suns, but each the centre of a system of bleach-haired minor satellites. It was into this heterogeneous mass that the tall man elbowed his way, a neat grip in either hand; the woman following closely in his wake, her skirts carefully lifted.

Clear of the out-flowing stream the man put down the satchels, and looked over the heads of the motley crowd into the still more motley street beyond. Two short rows of one-story buildings, distinctive by the brightness of new lumber on their sheltered side, bordered a narrow street, half clogged by the teams of visiting farmers. Not the faintest clue to a hostelry was visible, and the eyes of the man wandered back, interrupting by the way another pair of eyes frankly inquisitive.

The curious one was short; by comparison his face was still shorter, and round. From his chin a tiny tuft of whiskers protruded, like the handle of a gourd. Never was countenance more unmistakably labelled good-humored, Americanized German.

The eyes of the tall man stopped.

"Is there a hotel in this"--he groped for a classification--"this city?" he asked.

A rattling sound, startlingly akin to the agitated contents of over-ripe vegetables, came from somewhere in the internal mechanism of the small man. Inferentially, the inquiry was amusing to the questioned, likewise the immediately surrounding listeners who became suddenly silent, gazing at the stranger with the wonder of young calves.

At length the innate spirit of courtesy in the German triumphed over his amusement.

"Hans Becher up by the postoffice takes folks in." The inward commotion showed indications of resumption. "I never heard, though, that he called his place a hotel!"

"Thank you," and the circle of silence widened.

The man and the woman walked up the street. Beneath their feet the cottonwood sidewalk, despite its newness, was warped in agony under sun and storm. Big puddles of water from a recent rain stood in the hollows of the roadway, side by side with tufts of native grasses fighting bravely for life against the intruder--Man. A fresh, indescribable odor was in their nostrils; an odor which puzzled them then, but which later they learned to recognize and never forgot--the pungent scent of buffalo grass. A stillness, deeper than of Sabbath, unbelievable to urban ears, wrapped all things, and united with an absence of broken sky line, to produce an all-pervading sense of loneliness.

Hans Becher did not belie his name. He was very German. Likewise the little woman who courtesied at his side. Ditto the choice assortment of inquisitive tow-heads, who stared wide-eyed from various corners. He shook hands at the door with each of his guests,--which action also was unmistakably German.

"You would in my house--put up, you call it?" he inquired in labored English, while the little woman polished two speckless chairs with her apron, and with instinctive photographic art placed them stiffly side by side for the visitors.

"Yes, we'd like to stay with you for a time," corroborated the tall man.

The little German ran his fingers uncertainly through his hair for a moment; then his round face beamed.

"We should then become to each other known. Is it not so?" Without pausing for an answer, he put out a big hand to each in turn. "I am Hans Becher, and this"--with elaborate indications--"this my wife is--Minna."

Minna courtesied dutifully, lower than before. The little Bechers were not classified, but their connection was apparent. They calmly sucked their thumbs.

The lords of creation obviously held the rostrum. It was the tall man who responded.

"My name is Maurice, Ichabod Maurice." He looked at the woman, his companion, from the corner of his eye. "Allow me, Camilla, to present Mr. Becher." Then turning to his hosts, "Camilla Maurice: Mr. and Mrs. Becher."

The tall lady shook hands with each.

"Pleased to meet you," she said, and smiled a moment into their eyes. Thus Camilla Maurice made friends.

There were a few low-spoken words in German and Minna vanished.

"She will dinner make ready," Hans explained.

The visitors sat down in their chairs, with Hans opposite studying them narrowly; singly and together.

"The town is very new," suggested Ichabod.

"One year ago it was not." The German's short legs crossed each other nervously and their owner seized the opportunity to make further inspection. "It is very new," he repeated absently.

Camilla Maurice stood up.

"Might we wash, Mr. Becher?" she asked.

The ultimate predicament was all at once staring the little man in the face.

"To be sure.... I might have known.... You will a room--desire." ... He ran his fingers through his hair, and inspiration came. "Mr. Maurice," he motioned, "might I a moment with you--speak?"

"Certainly, Mr. Becher."

The German saw light, and fairly beamed as he sought the safe seclusion of the doorway.

"She is your sister or cousin--*nein*?" he asked.

There was the faintest suggestion of a smile in the corners of Ichabod's mouth.

"No, she is neither my sister nor my cousin, Mr. Becher."

Hans heaved a sigh of relief: it had been a close corner.

"She is your wife. One must know," and he mopped his brow.

"Certainly--one must know," very soberly.

Alone together in the little unfinished room under the rafters, the woman sat down on the corner of the bed, physical discomfort forgotten in feminine curiosity.

"Those names--where did you get them?" she queried.

"They came to me--at the moment," smiled the man.

"But the cold-blooded horror of them!... Ichabod!"

"The glory has departed."

His companion started, and the smile left the man's face.

"And Camilla?"--slowly.

"Attendant at a sacrifice."

Of a sudden the room became very still.

Ichabod, exploring, discovered a tiny wash basin and a bucket of water.

"You wished to wash, Camilla?"

The woman did not move.

"They were very kind"--she looked through the window with the tiny panes: "have we any right to--lie to them?"

"We have not lied."

"Tacitly."

"No. I'm Ichabod Maurice and you're Camilla Maurice. We have not lied."

"But--"

"The past is dead, dead!"

The woman's face dropped into her hands. Woman ever weeps instinctively for the dead.

"You are sorry that it is--so?" There was no bitterness in the man's voice, but he did not look at her, and Camilla misunderstood.

"Sorry!" She came close, and a soft warm face pressed tightly against his face. "Sorry!" Her arms were around him. "Sorry!" again repeated. "No! No! No! No, without end! I'm not sorry. I'm Camilla Maurice, the happiest woman in the world!"

Later they utilized the tin basin and the mirror with a crack across its centre. Dinner was waiting when they went below.

To a casual observer, Hans had been very idle while they were gone. He sat absently on the doorstep, watching the grass that grew almost visibly in the warm spring sun. Occasionally he tapped his forehead with his finger tips. It helped him to think, and just now he sadly needed assistance.

"Who were these people, anyway?" he wondered. Not farmers, certainly. Farmers did not have hands that dented when you pressed them, and farmers' wives did not lift their skirts daintily from behind. Hans had been very observant as his visitors came up the muddy street. No, that was not the way of farmers' wives: they took hold at the sides with both hands, and splashed right through on their heels.

Hans pulled the yellow tuft on his chin. What could they be, then? Not summer boarders. It was only early spring; and, besides, although the little German was an optimist, even he could not imagine any one selecting a Dakota prairie for an outing. Yet ... No, they could not be summer boarders.

But what then? In his intensity Hans actually forgot the grass and, unfailing producer of inspiration, ran his fingers frantically through his mane.

"Ah--at last--of course!" The round face beamed and a hard hand smote a harder knee, joyously. That he had not remembered at once! It was the new banker, to be sure. He would tell Minna, quite as a matter of fact, for there could be no mistake. Hank Judge, the machine agent, and Eli Stevens, the proprietor of the corner store, had said only yesterday there was to be a

bank. Looking up the street the little man spied a familiar figure, and sprang to his feet as though released by a spring, his hand already in the air. There was Hank Judge, now, and he didn't know--

"Dinner, Hans," announced Minna at his elbow.

Holding the child of his brain hard in both hands lest it should escape prematurely, the little German went inside to preside over a repast, the distinctively German incense of which ascended most appetizingly.

Hans, junior, in a childish treble, spoke an honest little German blessing, beginning "*Mein Vater von Himmel*," and emphasized by the raps of Hans senior's knuckles on certain other small heads to keep their owners quiet.

"Fresh lettuce and radishes!" commented Camilla, joyously.

"Raised in our own garden *hinein*," bobbed Minna, in ecstasy.

"And sauerkraut--" began Ichabod.

"From cabbages so large," completed Hans, spreading his arms to designate an imaginary vegetable of heroic proportions.

"They must have grown very fast to be so large in May," commented Camilla.

Hans and Minna exchanged glances--pitying, superior glances--such as we give behind the backs of the infirm, or the very old; and the subject of vegetables dropped.

"A great country for a bank, this," commented Mr. Becher, with infinite *finesse* and between intermittent puffs at a hot potato.

"Is that so?"

Hans nodded violent confirmation, then words, English words, being valuable to him, he came quickly to the test.

"You will build for the bank yourself, is it not so?"

It was not the German and Minna who exchanged glances this time.

"No, I shall not build for the bank myself, Mr. Becher."

"You will rent, perhaps?" Hans's faith was beautiful.

"No, I shall not rent."

The German's face fell. To have wasted all that thought; for after all it was not the banker!

Minna, senior, stared in surprise, and her attention being diverted, Minna the younger seized the opportunity to inundate herself with a cup of hot coffee.

The spell was broken.

"I'm going to take a homestead," explained Ichabod.

Hans's fork paused in mid-air and his mouth forgot to close. At the point where the German struck, the earth was very hard.

"So?" he interrogated, weakly.

At this juncture the difference between the two Minnas, which had been transferred from the table to the kitchen, was resumed; and although Ichabod ate the remaining kraut to the last shred, and Camilla talked to Hans of the *Vaterland* in his native German, each knew the occasion was a failure. An ideal had been raised, the ideal of a Napoleon of finance, a banker; and that ideal materializing, lo there stood forth a farmer! *Ach Gott von Himmel!*

After dinner Hans stood in the doorway and pointed out the land-office. Ichabod thanked him, and under the impulse of habit felt in his pocket for a cigar. None was there, and all at once he remembered Ichabod Maurice did not smoke. Strange he should have such an abominable inclination to do so just then; but nevertheless the fact remained. Ichabod Maurice never had smoked.

He started up the street.

A small man, with very high boots and a very long moustache, sat tipped back in the sun in front of the land-office. He was telling a story; a good one, judging from the attention of the row of listeners. He grasped the chair tightly with his left hand while his right, holding a cob pipe, gesticulated actively. The story halted abruptly as Ichabod came up.

"Howdy!" greeted the little man.

Maurice nodded.

"Don't let me interrupt you," he temporized.

"Not at all," courtesied the teller of stories, as he led the way inside. "I've told that one until I'm tired of it, anyway." He tapped the ashes from his pipe-bowl, meditatively. "A fellow has to kill the time some way, though, you know."

"Yes, I know," acquiesced Ichabod.

The agent took a chair behind the battered pine desk, and pointed to another opposite.

"Any way I can help you?" he suggested.

"Yes," answered Maurice. "I'm thinking of taking a homestead."

The agent looked his visitor up and down and back again; then, being native born, his surprise broke forth in idiom.

"Well, I'm jiggered!" he avowed.

It was Ichabod's turn to make observation.

"I believe you; you look it," he corroborated at length.

Again the little man stared; and in the silence following, a hungry-looking bird-dog thrust his thin muzzle in at the door, and sniffed.

"Get out," shouted the owner at the intruder, adding in extenuation: "I'm busy." He certainly was "jiggered."

Ichabod came to the rescue.

"I called to learn how one goes at it to take a claim," he explained. "The *modus operandi* isn't exactly clear in my mind."

The agent braced up in his chair.

"I suppose you'll say it's none of my business," he commented, "but as a speculation you'd do a lot better to buy up the claims of poor cusses who have to relinquish, than to settle yourself."

"I'm not speculating. I expect to build a house, and live here."

"As a friend, then, let me tell you you'll never stand it." A stubby thumb made motion up the narrow street. "You see this town. I won't say what it is--you realize for yourself; but bad as it is, it's advanced civilization alongside of the country. You'll have to go ten miles out to get any land that's not taken." He stopped and lit his pipe. "Do you know what it means to live alone ten miles out on the prairie?"

"I've never lived in the country."

"I'll tell you, then, what it means." He put down his pipe and looked out at the open door. His face changed; became softer, milder, younger. His voice, when he spoke, added to the impression of reminiscence, bearing an almost forgotten tone of years ago.

"The prairie!" he apostrophized. "It means the loneliest place on God's earth. It means that living there, in life you bury yourself, your hopes, your ambitions. It means you work ever to forget the past--and fail. It means self, always; morning, noon, night; until the very solitude becomes an incubus. It means that in time you die, or, from being a man, become as the cattle." The speaker turned for the first time to the tall man before him, his big blue eyes wide open and round, his voice an entreaty.

"Don't move into it, man. It's death and worse than death to such as you! You're too old to begin. One must be born to the life; must never have known another. Don't do it, I say."

Ichabod Maurice, listening, read in that appeal, beneath the words, the wild, unsatisfied tale of a disappointed human life.

"You are dissatisfied, lonesome--There was a time years ago perhaps--"

"I don't know." The glow had passed and the face was old again, and heavy. "I remember nothing. I'm dead, dead." He drew a rough map from his pocket and spread it out before him.

"If you'll move close, please, I'll show you the open lands."

For an hour he explained homesteads, preemptions and tree claims, and the method of filing and proving up. At parting, Ichabod held out his hand.

"I thank you for your advice," he said.

The man behind the desk puffed stolidly.

"But don't intend to follow it," he completed.

Instinctively, metaphor sprang to the lips of Ichabod Maurice.

"A small speck of circumstance, which is near, obliterates much that is in the distance." He turned toward the door. "I shall not be alone."

The little agent smoked on in silence for some minutes, gazing motionless at the doorway through which Ichabod had passed out. Again the lean bird-dog thrust in an apologetic head, dutifully awaiting recognition. At length the man shook his pipe clean, and leaned back in soliloquy.

"Man, woman, human nature; habit, solitude, the prairie." He spoke each word slowly, and with a shake of his head. "He's mad, mad; but I pity him"--a pause--"for I know."

The dog whined an interruption from the doorway, and the man looked up.

"Come in, boy," he said, in recognition.

CHAPTER III--THE WONDER OF PRAIRIE

Ichabod and Camilla selected their claim together. A fair day's drive it was from the little town; a half-mile from the nearest neighbor, a Norwegian, without two-score English words in his vocabulary. Level it was, as the surface of a lake or the plane of a railroad bed.

Together, too, they chose the spot for their home. Camilla sobbed over the word; but she was soon dry-eyed and smiling again. Afterwards, side by side, they did much journeying to and from the nearest sawmill--each trip through a day and a night--thirty odd miles away. The mill was a small, primitive affair, almost lost in the straggling box-elders and soft maples that bordered the muddy Missouri, producing, amid noisy protestations, the most despicable of all lumber on the face of the globe--twisting, creeping, crawling cottonwood.

Having the material on the spot, Ichabod built the house himself, after a plan never before seen of man; joint product of his and Camilla's brains. It took a month to complete; and in the meantime, each night they threw their tired bodies on the brown earth, indifferent to the thin canvas, which alone was spread between them and the stars.

Too utterly weary for immediate sleep, they listened to the sounds of animal life--wholly unfamiliar to ears urban trained--as they stood out distinct by contrast with a silence otherwise absolute as the grave.

... The sharp bark of the coyote, near or far away; soft as an echo, the gently cadenced tremolo of the prairie owl. To these, the mere opening numbers of the nightly concerts, the two exotics would listen wonderingly; then, of a sudden, typical, indescribable, lonely as death, there would boom the cry which, as often as it was repeated, recalled to Ichabod's mind the words of the little man in the land-office, "loneliest sound on earth"--the sound which, once heard, remains forever vivid--the night call of the prairie rooster. Even now, new and fascinating as it all was, at the last wailing cry the two occupants of the tent would reach out in the darkness until their hands met. Not till then would they sleep.

In May, they finished and moved their few belongings into the odd little two-room house. True to instinct, Ichabod had built a fireplace, though looking in any direction until the earth met the sky, not a tree was visible; and Camilla had added a cozy reading corner, which soon developed into a sleeping corner,--out-of-door occupations in sun and wind being insurmountable obstacles to mental effort.

But what matter! One straggling little folio, the local newspaper, made its way into the corner each week--and that was all. They had cut themselves off from the world, deliberately, irrevocably. It was but natural that they should sleep. All dead things sleep!

Month after month slipped by, and the first ripple of local excitement and curiosity born of their advent subsided. Ichabod knew nothing of farming, but to learn was simple. It needed only that he watch what his neighbors were doing, and proceed to do likewise. He learned soon to hold a breaking-plough in the tough prairie sod, and to swear mightily when it balked at an unusually tough root. As well, he came to know the oily feel of flax as he scattered it by hand over the brown breaking. Later he learned the smell of buckwheat blossoms, and the delicate green coloring of sod corn, greener by contrast with its dark background.

Nor was Camilla idle. The dresses she had brought with her, dainty creations of foreign make, soon gave way to domestic productions of gingham and print. In these, the long brown hands neatly gloved, she struggled with a tiny garden, becoming in ratio as passed the weeks, warmer, browner, and healthier.

"Are you happy?" asked Ichabod, one day, observing her thus amid the fruits of her hands.

Camilla hesitated. Catching her hand, Ichabod lifted her chin so that their eyes met.

"Tell me, are you happy?" he repeated.

Another pause, though her eyes did not falter.

"Happier than I ever thought to be." She touched his sleeve tenderly. "But not completely so, for--" she was not looking at him now,--"for I love you, and--and--I'm a woman."

They said no more; and though Ichabod went back to his team, it was not to work. For many minutes he stood motionless, a new problem of right and wrong throbbing in his brain.

Fall came slowly, bringing the drowsy, hazy days of so-called Indian Summer. It was the season of threshing, and all day long to the drowse of the air was added, near and afar, all-pervading through the stillness, the sleepy hum of the separator. Typical voice of the prairie was that busy drone, penetrating to the ears as the ubiquitous odor of the buffalo grass to the nostril, again bearing resemblance in that, once heard, memory would reproduce the sound until recollection was no more.

Winter followed, and they, who had thought the earth quiet before, found it still now indeed. Even the voice of the prairie-chicken was hushed; only the sharp knife-like cutting of spread wings told of a flock's passage at night. The level country, mottled white with occasional drifts, and brown from spots blown bare by the wind, stretched out seemingly interminable, until the line of earth and sky met.

Idle perforce, the two exotics would stand for hours in the sunshine of their open doorway, shading their eyes from the glare and looking out, out into the distance that was as yet only a name--and that the borrowed name of an Indian tribe.

"What a country!" Camilla would say, struck each time anew with a never-ending wonder.

"Yes, what a country," Ichabod would echo, unconscious that he had repeated the same words in the same way a score of times before.

In January, a blizzard settled upon them, and for two days and nights they took turns keeping the big kitchen stove red hot. The West knows no such storms, now. Man has not only changed

the face of the earth, but, in so doing, has annihilated that terror of the past--the Dakota blizzard.

In those days, though, it was very real, as Ichabod learned. He had prepared for winter, by hauling a huge pile of cordwood and stacking it, as a protection to windward, the full length of the little cabin, thinking the spot always accessible; but he had builded in ignorance.

The snow first commenced falling in the afternoon. By the next morning the tiny house was buried to the window sashes. Looking out, there could be seen but an indistinct slanting white wall, scarcely ten feet away: a screen through which the sunlight filtered dimly, like the solemn haze of a church. The earth was not silent, now. The falling of the sleet and snow was as the striking of fine shot, and the sound of the wind a steady unceasing moan, resembling the sigh of a big dynamo at a distance.

Slowly, inch by inch, during that day the snow crept up the window panes until, before the coming of darkness without, it fell within. Banked though they were on three sides, on the fourth side, unprotected, the cold penetrated bitterly,--a cold no living thing could withstand without shelter. Then it was that Ichabod and Camilla feared to sleep, and that the long vigil began.

By the next morning there was no light from the windows. The snow had drifted level with the eaves. Ichabod stood in the narrow window frame, and, lowering the glass from the top, beat a hole upward with a pole to admit air. Through the tunnel thus formed there filtered the dull gray light of day: and at its end, obstructing, there stood revealed a slanting drab wall,--a condensed milky way.

The storm was yet on, and he closed the window. To get outside for fuel that day was impossible, so with an axe Ichabod chopped a hole through the wall into the big pile, and on wood thus secured sawed steadily in the tiny kitchen, while the kerosene lamp at his side sputtered, and the fire crackled in a silence, like that surrounding a hunted animal in its den.

Many usual events had occurred in the lives of the wandering Ichabod and Camilla, which had been forgotten; but the memory of that day, the overwhelming, incontestible knowledge of the impotency of wee, restless, inconsequent man, they were never to forget.

"Tiny, tiny, mortal!" laughed the storm. "To think you would combat Nature, would defy her, the power of which I am but one of many, many manifestations!" And it laughed again. The two prisoners, listening, their ears to the tunnel, heard the sound, and felt to the full its biting mockery.

Next day the siege was raised, and the sun smiled as only the sun can smile upon miles and miles of dazzling snow crystals. Ichabod climbed out--by way of the window route--and worked for hours with a shovel before he had a channel from the tiny, submerged shanty to the light of day beyond. Then together he and Camilla stood side by side in the doorway, as they had done so many times before, looking about them at the boundless prairie, drifted in waves of snow like the sea: the wonder of it all, ever new, creeping over them.

"What a country!" voiced Camilla.

"What a country, indeed," echoed Ichabod.

"Lonely and mysterious as Death."

"Yes, as Death or--Life."

CHAPTER IV--A REVELATION

Time, unchanging automaton, moved on until late spring. Paradox of nature, the warm brown tints of chilly days gave place under the heat of slanting suns to the cool green of summer. All at once, sudden as though autochthonal, there appeared meadow-larks and blackbirds: dead weeds or man-erected posts serving in lieu of trees as vantage points from which to sing. Ground squirrels whistled cheerily from newly broken fields and roadways. Coveys of quail, tame as barn-yard fowls, played about the beaten paths, and ran pattering in the dust ahead of each passing team. Again, from its winter's rest, lonely, uncertain as to distance, came the low, booming call of the prairie rooster. Nature had awakened, and the joy of that awakening was upon the land.

Of a morning in May the faded, dust-covered day-coach drew in at the tiny prairie village. A little man alighted. He stood a moment on the platform, his hands deep in his pockets, a big black cigar between his teeth, and looked out over the town. The coloring of the short straggling street was more weather-stained than a year ago, yet still very new, and the newcomer smiled as he looked; a big broad smile that played about his lips, turning up the corners of his brown moustache, showing a flash of white teeth, and lighting a pair of big blue eyes which lay, like a woman's, beneath heavy lashes. In youth, that smile would have been a grin; but it was no grin now. The man was far from youth, and about the mouth and eyes were deep lines, which told of one who knew of the world.

Slowly the smile disappeared, and as it faded the little man puffed harder at the cigar. Evidently something he particularly wished to explain would not become clear to his mind.

"Of all places," he soliloquized, "to have chosen--this!"

He started up the street, over the irregular warping sidewalk.

"Hotel, sir-r?" The formula was American, the trilling r's distinctly German.

The traveller turned at the sound, to make acquaintance with Hans Becher; for it was Hans Becher, very much metamorphosed from the retiring German of a year ago. He made the train regularly now.

The small man nodded and held out his grip; together they walked up the street. In front of the hotel they stopped, and the stranger pulled out his watch.

"Is there a livery here?" he asked.

"Yes; at the street end--the side to the left hand."

"Thanks. I'll be back with you this evening."

Hans Becher stared, open-mouthed, as the man moved off.

"You will not to dinner return?"

The little man stopped, and smiled without apparent reason.

"No. Keep the grip. I expect to lunch," again he smiled without provocation, "elsewhere. By the way," he added, as an afterthought, "can you tell me where Mr. Maurice--Ichabod Maurice--lives?"

The German nodded violent confirmation of a direction indicated by his free hand.

"Straight out, eight miles. Little house with *paint*"--strong emphasis on the last--"white paint."

"Thanks."

Hans saw the escape of an opportunity.

"They are friends of yours, perhaps?"--he grasped at it.

The little man did not turn, but the smile that seemed almost a habit, sprang to his face.

"Yes, they're--friends of mine," he corroborated.

Hans, personification of knowledge, stood bobbing on the doorstep, until the trail of smoke vanished from sight, then brought the satchel inside and set it down hard.

"Her brother has come," he announced to the wide-eyed Minna.

"*Wessen Bruder?*" Minna was obviously excited, as attested by the lapse from English.

"Are we not now Americans naturalized?" rebuked Hans, icily. Suddenly he thawed. "Whose brother! The brother of Camilla Maurice, to be sure."

Minna scrutinized the bag, curiously.

"Did he so--inform you?" she questioned unadvisedly.

"It was not necessary. I have eyes."

Offended masculine dignity clumped noisily toward the door; instinctive feminine diplomacy sprang to the rescue.

"You are so wise, Hans!"

And Peace, sweet Peace, returned to the household of Becher.

Meanwhile the little man had secured a buggy, and was jogging out into the country. He drove very leisurely, looking about him curiously. Of a sudden he threw down his cigar, and sniffed at the air.

"Buffalo grass, I'll wager! I've heard of it," and in the instinctive action of every newcomer he sniffed again.

Camilla Maurice sat in front of her tiny house, the late morning sun warm about her; one hand supported a book, slanted carefully to avoid the light, the other held the crank of a barrel-churn. As she read, she turned steadily, the monotonous *chug! chug!* of the tumbling cream drowning all other sounds.

Suddenly the shadow of a horse passed her and a rough livery buggy stopped at her side. She looked up. Instinctively her hand dropped the crank, and her face turned white; then equally involuntarily she returned to her work, and the *chug! chug!* continued.

"Does Ichabod Maurice," drawling emphasis on the name, "live here?" asked a voice.

"He does." Camilla's chin was trembling; her answer halted abruptly.

The man looked down at her, genuine amusement depicted upon his face.

"Won't you please stop your work for a moment, Camilla?"

With the name, one hand made swift movement of deprecation. "Pardon if I mistake, but I take it you're Camilla Maurice?"

"Yes, I'm Camilla Maurice."

"Quite so! You see, Ichabod and I were old chums together in college--all that sort of thing; consequently I've always wanted to meet--"

The woman stood up. Her face still was very white, but her chin did not tremble now.

"Let's stop this farce," she insisted. "What is it you wish?"

The man in the buggy again made a motion of deprecation.

"I was just about to say, that happening to be in town, and incidentally hearing the name, I wondered if it were possible.... But, pardon, I haven't introduced myself. Allow me--" and he bowed elaborately. "Arnold, Asa Arnold.... You've heard Ichabod mention my name, perhaps?"

The woman held up her hand.

"Again I ask, what do you wish?"

"Since you insist, first of all I'd like to speak a moment with Ichabod." His face changed suddenly. "For Heaven's sake, Eleanor, if he must alter his name, why did he choose such a barbaric substitute as Ichabod?"

"Were he here"--evenly--"he'd doubtless explain that himself."

"He's not here, then?" No banter in the voice now.

"Never fear"--quickly--"he'll return."

A moment they looked into each other's eyes; challengingly, as they had looked unnumbered times before.

"As you suggest, Eleanor," said the man, slowly, "this farce has gone far enough. Where may I tie this horse? I wish to speak with you."

Camilla pointed to a post, and silently went toward the house. Soon the man followed her, stopping a moment to take a final puff at his cigar before throwing it away.

Within the tiny kitchen they sat opposite, a narrow band of warm spring sunshine creeping in at the open door separating them. The woman looked out over the broad prairie, her color a trifle higher than usual, the lids of her eyes a shade nearer together--that was all. The man crossed his legs and waited, looking so small that he seemed almost boyish. In the silence, the drone of feeding poultry came from the back-yard, and the sleepy breathing of the big collie on the steps sounded plainly through the room.

A minute passed. Neither spoke. Then, with a shade of annoyance, the man shifted in his chair.

"I thought, perhaps, you'd have something you wished to say. If not, however--" He paused meaningly.

"You said a moment ago, you wished to speak to *me*."

"As usual, you make everything as difficult as possible." The shade of annoyance became positive. "Such being the case, we may as well come to the point. How soon do you contemplate bringing this--this incident to a close?"

"The answer to that question concerns me alone."

An ordinary man would have laughed; but Asa Arnold was not an ordinary man--not at this time.

"As your husband, I can't agree with you."

Camilla Maurice took up his words, quickly.

"You mistake. You're the husband of Eleanor Owen. I'm not she."

The man went on calmly, as though there had been no interruption.

"I don't want to be hard on you, Eleanor. I don't think I have been hard on you. A year has passed, and I've known you were here from the first day. But this sort of thing can't go on indefinitely; there's a limit, even to good nature. I ask you again, when are you coming back?"

The woman looked at her companion, for the first time steadily. Even she, who knew him so well, felt a shade of wonder at the man who could adjust all the affairs of his life in the same voice with which he ordered his dinner. Before, she had always thought this attitude of his pure affectation. Now she knew better, knew it mirrored the man himself. He had done this thing. Knowing her whereabouts all the time, he had allotted her the past year, as an employer would grant a holiday to an assistant. Now he asked her to return to the old life, as calmly as one returns in the fall to the city home after an outing! Only one man in the world could have done that thing, and that man was before her--her husband by law--Asa Arnold!

The wonder of it all crept into her voice.

"I'm not coming back, can't you understand? I'm never coming back," she repeated.

The man arose and stood in the doorway.

"Don't say that," he said very quietly. "Not yet. I won't begin, now, after all these years to make protestations of love. The thing called Love we've discussed too often already, and without result. Anyway, that's not the point. We never pretended to be lovers, even when we were married. We were simply useful, very useful to each other."

Camilla started to interrupt him, but, preventing, he held up his hand.

"We talked over a certain possibility--one now a reality--before we were married." He caught the look upon her face. "I don't say it was ideal. It simply *was*," he digressed slowly in answer, then hurried on: "That was only five years ago, Eleanor, and we were far from young." He looked at her, searchingly. "You've not forgotten the contract we drew up, that stood above the marriage obligation, above everything, supreme law for you and me?" Instinctively his hand went to an inner pocket, where the rustle of a paper answered his touch. "Remember; it's not a favor I ask of you, but the fulfilment of your own word. Think a moment before you say you'll never return."

Camilla Maurice found an answer very difficult. Had he been angry, or abusive, it would have been easy; but as it was--

"You overlook the fact of change. A lifetime isn't required for that."

"I overlook nothing." The man went back to his chair. "You remember, as well as I, that we considered the problem of change--and laughed at it. I repeat, we're no longer in swaddling clothes."

"Be that as it may, I tell you the whole world looks different to me now." The speaker struggled bravely, but the ghastliness of such a discussion wore on her nerves, and her face twitched. "No power on earth could make me keep that contract since I've changed."

The suggestion of a smile played about the man's mouth.

"You've succeeded, perhaps, in finding that for which we searched so long in vain, an æsthetic, non-corporeal love?"

"I refuse to answer a question which was intended as an insult."

The words out of her mouth, the woman regretted them.

"Though quick yourself to take offence, you seem at no great pains to avoid giving affront to another." The man voiced the reprimand without the twitch of an eyelid, and finished with another question: "Have you any reason for doing as you've done, other than the one you gave?"

"Reason! Reason!" Camilla Maurice stared again. "Isn't it reason enough that I love him, and don't love you? Isn't it sufficient reason to one who has lived until middle life in darkness that a ray of light is in sight? Of all people in the world, you're the one who should understand the reason best!"

"Would any of those arguments be sufficient to break another contract?"

"No, but one I didn't mention would. Even when I lived with you, I was of no more importance than a half-dozen other women."

"You didn't protest at time of the agreement. You knew then my belief and," Arnold paused meaningly, "your own."

A memory of the past came to the woman; the dark, lonely past, which, even yet, after so many years, came to her like a nightmare; the time when she was a stranger in a strange town, without joy of past or hope of future; most lonely being on God's earth, a woman with an ambition--and without friends.

"I was mad--I see it now--lonely mad. I met you. Our work was alike, and we were very useful to each other." One white hand made motion of repugnance at the thought. "I was mad, I say."

"Is that your excuse for ignoring a solemn obligation?" Arnold looked her through. "Is that your excuse for leaving me for another, without a word of explanation, or even the conventional form of a divorce?"

"It was just that explanation--this--I wished to avoid. It's hard for us both, and useless."

"Useless!" The man quickly picked up the word. "Useless! I don't like the suggestion of that word. It hints of death, and old age, and hateful things. It has no place with the living."

He drew a paper from his pocket, slowly, and spread it on his knee.

"Pardon me for again recalling past history, Eleanor; but to use a word that is dead!... You must have forgotten--" The writing, a dainty, feminine hand, was turned toward her, tauntingly, compellingly.

The man waited for some response; but Camilla Maurice was silent. That bit of paper, the shadow of a seemingly impossible past, made her, for the time, question her identity, almost doubt it.

Five years ago, almost to the day, high up in a city building, in a dainty little room, half office, half *atelier*, a man and a woman had copied an agreement, each for the other, and had sworn an oath ever to remain true to that solemn bond.... She had brought nothing to him, but herself; not even affection. He, on the other hand, had saved her from a life of drudgery by elevating her to a position where, free of the necessity of struggling for a bare existence, she might hope to consummate the fruition of at least a part of her dreams. On her part....

"Witnesseth: The said Eleanor Owen is at liberty to follow her own inclinations as she may see fit; she is to remain free of any and all responsibilities and restrictions such as customarily attach to the supervision of a household, excepting as she may elect to exercise her wifely prerogatives; being absolutely free to pursue whatsoever occupation or devices she may desire or choose, the same as if she were yet a spinster...."

"In Consideration of Which: The said Eleanor Owen agrees never so to comport herself that by word or conduct will she bring ridicule.... dishonor upon the name...."

Recollection of it all came to her with a rush; but the words ran together and swam in a maddening blur--the roar from the street below, dull with distance; the hum of the big building, with its faint concussions of closing doors; the air from the open window, not like the sweet prairie air of to-day, but heavy, smoky, typical breath of the town, yet pregnant with the indescribable throb of spring, impossible to efface or to disguise! The compelling intimacy and irrevocability of that memory overwhelmed her, now; a dark, evil flood that blotted out the

sunshine of the present.

The paper rustled, as the man smoothed it flat with his hand.

"Shall I read?" he asked.

The woman's face stood clear--cruelly clear--in the sunlight; about her mouth and eyes there was an expression which, from repetition, we have learned to associate with the circle surrounding a new-made grave: an expression hopelessly desperate, desperately hopeless.

Of a sudden her chin trembled and her face dropped into her hands.

"Read, if you wish"; and the smooth brown head, with its thread of gray, trembled uncontrollably.

"Eleanor!" with a sudden vibration of tenderness in his voice. "Eleanor," he repeated.

But the woman made no response.

The man had taken a step forward; now he sat down again, looking through the open doorway at the stretch of green prairie, with the road, a narrow ribbon of brown, dividing it fair in the middle. In the distance a farmer's wagon was rumbling toward town, a trail of fine dust, like smoke, suspended in the air behind. It rattled past, and the big collie on the step woke to give furious chase in its wake, then returned slowly, a little conscious under the stranger's eye, to sleep as before. Asa Arnold sat through it all, still as one devitalized; an expression on his face no man had ever seen before; one hopeless, lonely, akin to that of the woman.

"Read, if you wish," repeated Camilla, bitterly.

For a long minute her companion made no motion.

"It's unnecessary," he intoned at last. "You know as well as I that neither of us will ever forget one word it contains." He hesitated and his voice grew gentle. "Eleanor, you know I didn't come here to insult you, or to hurt you needlessly;--but I'm human. You seem to forget this. You brand me less than a man, and then ask of me the unselfishness of a God!"

Camilla's white face lifted from her hands.

"I ask nothing except that you leave me alone."

For the first time the little man showed his teeth.

"At last you mention the point I came here to arrange. Were you alone, rest assured I shouldn't trouble you."

"You mean--"

"I mean just this. I wouldn't be human if I did what you ask--if I condoned what you've done and are still doing." He was fairly started now, and words came crowding each other; reproachful, tempestuous.

"Didn't you ever stop to think of the past--think what you've done, Eleanor?" He paused without giving her an opportunity to answer. "Let me tell you, then. You've broken every manner of faith between man and woman. If you believe in God, you've broken faith with Him as well. Don't think for a moment I ever had respect for marriage as a divine institution, but I did have respect for you, and at your wish we conformed. You're my wife now, by your own choosing. Don't interrupt me, please. I repeat, God has no more to do with ceremonial marriage now than he had at the time of the Old Testament and polygamy. It's a man-made bond, but an obligation nevertheless, and as such, at the foundation of all good faith between man and woman. It's this good faith you've broken." A look of bitterness flashed over his face.

"Still, I could excuse this and release you at the asking, remaining your friend, your best friend as before; but to be thrown aside without even a 'by your leave,' and that for another man--" He hesitated and finished slowly:

"You know me well enough, Eleanor, to realize that I'm in earnest when I say that while I live the man has yet to be born who can take something of mine away from me."

Camilla gestured passionately.

"In other words: while growling hard at the dog who approached your bone, you have no hesitation in stealing from another!" The accumulated bitterness of years of repression spoke in the taunt.

Across the little man's face there fell an impenetrable mask, like the armor which dropped about an ancient ship of war before the shock of battle.

"I'm not on trial. I've not changed my name--" he nodded significantly toward the view beyond the open door,--"and sought seclusion."

Again the bitterness of memory prompted Camilla to speak the harshest words of her life.

"No, you hadn't the decency. It was more pleasure to thrust your shame daily in my face."

Arnold's color paled above the dark beard line; but the woman took no heed.

"Why did you wait a year," continued the bitter voice, "to end in--this? If it must have been--why not before?"

"I repeat, I'm not on trial. If you've anything to say, I'll listen."

Something new in the man's face caught Camilla's attention, softened the tone of her voice.

"I've only this to say. You've asked for an explanation and a promise; but I can give you neither. If there ever comes a time when I feel they're due you, and I'm able to comply, I'll give them both gladly." The absent look of the past returned to her eyes. "Even if I wished, I couldn't give you an explanation now. I can't make myself understand the contradiction. Somehow, knowing you so long, your beliefs crept insistently into my loneliness. It seems hideous now, but I was honest then. I believed them, too. I don't blame you; I only pity you. You were the embodiment of protest against the established, of the non-responsibility of the individual, of skepticism in everything. Your eternal 'why' covered my horizon. Every familiar thing came to bear a question I couldn't answer. My whole life seemed one eternal doubt. One thing I'd never known, and I questioned it most of all; the one thing I know now to be the truth,—the greatest truth in the world." For an instant the present crowded the past from Camilla's mind, but only for an instant. "Whatever I was at the time, you'd made me—with your deathless 'why.' When I signed the obligation of that day, I believed it was of my own free will; but I know now it was you who wrote it for both of us—you, with your perpetual interrogation. I don't accuse you of doing this deliberately, maliciously. We were both deceived; but none the less the fact remains." A shadow, almost of horror, passed over her face.

"Time passed, and though you didn't know, I was in Hell. Reason told me I was right. Instinct, something, called me a drag. I tried to compromise, and we were married. Then, for the first time, came realization. We were the best of friends,—but only friends."

"You wonder how I knew. I didn't tell you then. I couldn't. I could only feel, and that not clearly. The shadow of your 'why' was still dark upon me. What I vaguely felt then, though, I know now; as I recognize light or cold or pain." Her voice assumed the tone of one who speaks of mysteries; slow, vibrant. "In every woman's mind the maternal instinct should be uppermost; before everything, before God,—unashamed, inevitable. It's unmistakably the distinction of a good woman from a bad. The choosing of the father of her child is a woman's unfailing test of love."

The face of the man before her dropped into his hands, but she did not notice.

"Gropingly I felt this, and the knowledge came almost as an inspiration. It gave a clue to—"

"Stop!" The man's eyes blazed, as he leaped from his chair. "Stop!"

He took a step forward, his hand before him, his face twitching uncontrollably. The collie on the step awoke, and seeing his mistress threatened, growled ominously.

"Stop, I tell you!" Arnold choked for words. This the man of "why," whom nothing before could shake!

Camilla paled as her companion arose, and the dog, bristling, came inside the room.

"Get out!" blazed the man, with a threatening step, and the collie fled.

The interruption loosed words which came tumbling forth in a torrent, as Arnold returned to face her.

"You think I'm human, and yet tell me that to my face?" His voice was terrible. "You women brand men cruel! No man on earth would speak as you have spoken to a woman he'd lived with for four years!" The sentences crowded over each other, like water over a fall—his eyes flashing like a spray.

"I told you before, I'm not on trial; that it was not my place to defend. I don't do so now; but since you've spoken, I'll answer your question. You ask why I didn't come a year ago, hinting that I wanted to be more cruel. God! the blindness and injustice of you women! Because we men don't show—Bah!... I was paying my own price. We weren't living by the marriage vow; it was but a farce. Our own contract was the vital thing, and it had said—But I won't repeat. God, it was bitter! But I thought you'd come back. I loved you still." He paused for words, breathing hard.

"You say, I'll never know what love is. Blind! I've always loved you until this moment, when you killed my love. You say I was untrue. It's false. I swear it before—you, as you were once,—when you were my god. Had you trusted me, as I trusted you, there'd have been no thought of unfaithfulness in your mind."

The woman sank back in the chair, her face covered, her whole body trembling; but Asa Arnold went on like the storm.

"Yes, I was ever true to you. From the first moment we met, and against my own beliefs. You didn't see. You expected me to protest it daily: to repeat the tale as a child repeats its lesson for a comfit. Blind, I say, blind! You'll charge that I never told you that I loved you. You wouldn't have believed me, even had I done so. Besides, I didn't realize that you doubted, until the time when you were learning—" he walked jerkily across the room and took up his hat,—"learning the thing you threw in my face." He started to leave, but stopped in the doorway, without looking back. "You tell me you've suffered. For the first time in my life I say to another human being: I hope so." He turned, unsteadily, down the steps.

"Wait," pleaded the woman. "Wait!"

The man did not stop, or turn.

Camilla Maurice sank back in the chair, weak as one sick unto death, her mind a throbbing, whirling chaos,—as of a patient under an anæsthetic. Something she knew she ought to do, intended doing, and could not. She groped desperately, but overwhelming, insistent, there had

developed in her a sudden, preventing tumult--in paradox, a confusion in rhythm--like the beating of a great hammer on an anvil, only incredibly more swift than blows from human hands. Over and over again she repeated to herself the one word: "wait," "wait," "wait," but mechanically now, without thought as to the reason. Then, all at once, soft, all-enfolding, kindly Nature wrapped her in darkness.

She awoke with the big collie licking her hand, and a numbness of cramped limbs that was positive pain. A long-necked pullet was standing in the doorway, with her mouth open; others stood wondering, beyond. The sun had moved until it no longer shone in at the tiny south windows, and the shadow of the house had begun to lengthen.

Camilla stood up in the doorway; uncertain, dazed. A great lump was on her forehead, which she stroked absently, without surprise at its presence. She looked about the yard, and, her breath coming more quickly, at the prairie. A broad green plain, parted by the road squarely in the centre, smiled at her in the sunlight. That was all. She stepped outside and shaded her eyes with her hand. Not a wagon nor a human being was in sight.

Again the weakness and the blackness came stealing over her; she sank down on the doorstep.

"O God, what have I done!" she wailed.

The hens returned to their search for bugs; but the big collie stayed by her side, whimpering and fondling her hand.

CHAPTER V--THE DOMINANCE OF THE EVOLVED

The keen joy of life was warmly flooding Ichabod Maurice this spring day. Not life for the sake of an ambition or a duty, but delight in the mere animal pleasure of existence. He had risen early, and, a neighbor with him, they had driven forth: stars all about, perpendicular, horizontal, save in the reddening east, upon their long day's drive to the sawmill. The two teams plodded along steadily, their footfall muffled in the soft prairie loam; the earth elsewhere soundless, with a silence which even yet was a marvel to the city man.

The majesty of it held him silent until day dawned, and with the coming of the sun there woke in unison the chorus of joyous animal life. Then Ichabod, his long legs dangling over the dashboard, lifted up a voice untrained as the note of a loon, and sang lustily, until his companion on the wagon ahead,--boy-faced, man-bodied,--grinned perilously.

The long-visaged man was near happiness that morning,--unbelievably near. By nature unsocial, by habit, city inbred, artificially taciturn, there came with the primitive happiness of the moment the concomitant primitive desire for companionship. He smiled self-tolerantly when, obeying an instinct, he wound the lines around the seat, and went ahead to the man, who grinned companionably as he made room beside him.

"God's country, this." Ichabod's hand made an all-including gesture, as he seated himself comfortably, his hat low over his eyes.

"Yes, sir," and the grin was repeated.

The tall man reflected. Sunburned, roughly dressed, unshaven as he, Maurice, was, this boy-man never failed the word of respect. Ichabod examined him curiously out of his shaded lids. Big brown hands; body strong as a bull; powerful shoulders; neck turned like a model; a soft chin under a soft, light beard; gentle blue eyes--all in all, a face so open that its very legibility seemed a mark. It reddened now, under the scrutiny.

"Pardon," said Ichabod. "I was thinking how happy you are."

"Yes, sir." And the face reddened again.

Ichabod smiled.

"When is it to be, Ole?"

The big body wriggled in blissful embarrassment.

"As soon as the house is built,"--confusedly.

"You're building very fast, eh?"

The Swede grinned confirmation. Words were of value to Ole.

"I see the question was superfluous," and Ichabod likewise smiled in genial comradery. A moment later, however, the smile vanished.

"You're very content as it is, Ole," he digressed, equivocally; "but--supposing--Minna were already the wife of a friend?"

The Swede stared in breathless astonishment.

"She isn't, though" he gasped at length in startled protest.

"But supposing--"

"It would be so. I couldn't help it."

"You'd do nothing?" rank anarchy in the suggestion.

"What would there be to do?"

Ichabod temporized.

"Supposing again, she loved you, and didn't love her husband?" Ole scratched his head, seeing very devious passages beyond. "That would be different," and he crossed his legs.

Ichabod smiled. The world over, human nature is fashioned from one mould.

"Supposing, once more, it's a year from now,--five years from now. You've married Minna, but you're not happy. She's grown to hate you,--to love another man?"

Ole's faith was beautiful.

"It's not to be thought of. It's impossible!"

"But supposing," urged Ichabod.

The boy-man was silent for a very long minute; then his face darkened, and the soft jaw grew hard.

"I don't know--" he said slowly,--"I don't know, but I think I kill that man."

Ichabod did not smile this time.

"We're all much alike, Ole. I think you would."

They drove on; far past the town, now; the sun high in the sky; dew sparkling like prisms innumerable; the prairie colorings soft as a rug--its varied greens of groundwork blending with the narrow line of fresh breaking rolling at their feet.

"You were born in this country?" asked Ichabod suddenly.

"In Iowa. It's much like this--only rougher."

"You'll live here, always?"

The Swede shook his head and the boy's face grew older.

"No; some day, we're going to the city--Minna and I. We've planned."

Ichabod was thoughtful a minute.

"I'm a friend of yours, Ole."

"A very good friend," repeated the mystified Swede.

"Then, listen, and don't forget." The voice was vibrant, low, but the boy heard it clearly above the noise of the wagon. "Don't do it, Ole; in God's name, don't do it! Stay here, you'll be happy." He looked the open-mouthed listener deep in the eyes. "If you ever say a prayer, let it be the old one, even though it be an insult to a just God:--'Lead us not into temptation.' Avoid, as you would avoid death, the love of money, the fever of unrest, the desire to become greater than your fellows, the thirst to know and to taste all things, which is the spirit of the city. Live close to Nature, where all is equal and all is good; where sleep comes in the time of sleep, and work when it is day. Do that labor which comes to you at the moment, leaving to-morrow to Nature." He crossed his long legs, and pressed his hat down over his eyes. "Accept life as Nature gives it, day by day. Don't question, and you'll find it good." He repeated himself slowly. "That's the secret. Don't doubt, or question anything."

In the Swede's throat there was a rattling, which presaged speech, but it died away.

"Do you love children, Ole?" asked Ichabod, suddenly.

The boy face flushed. Ole was very young.

"I--" he lagged.

"Of course you do. Every living human being does. It's the one good instinct, which even the lust of gain doesn't down. It's the tie that binds,--the badge of brotherhood which makes the world one." He gently laid his hand on the broad shoulder beside him.

"Don't be ashamed to say you love children, boy, though the rest of the world laugh,--for they're laughing at a lie. They'll tell you the parental instinct is dying out with the advance of civilization; that the time will come when man will educate himself to his own extinction. It's false, I tell you, absolutely false." Ichabod had forgotten himself, and he rushed on, far above the head of the gaping Swede.

"There's one instinct in the world, the instinct of parenthood, which advances eternal, stronger, infinitely, as man's mind grows stronger. So unvarying the rule that it's almost an index of civilization itself, advancing from a crude instinct of the body-base and animal--until it reaches the realm of the mind: the highest, the holiest of man's desires: yet stronger immeasurably, as with the educated, things of the mind are stronger than things of the body. Those who deny this are fools, or imposters,--I know not which. To do so is to strike at the very foundation of human nature,--but impotently,--for in fundamentals, human nature is good." Unconsciously, a smile flashed over the long face.

"Talk about depopulating the earth! All the wars of primitive man were inadequate. The vices of civilization have likewise failed. Even man's mightiest weapon, legislation, couldn't stay the tide for a moment, if it would. While man is man, and woman is woman, that long, above government, religion,--life and death itself,--will reign supreme the eternal instinct of parenthood."

Ichabod caught himself in his own period and stopped, a little ashamed of his earnestness. He sat up in the seat preparatory to returning to his own wagon, then dropped his hand once more on the boy's shoulder.

"I'm old enough to be your father, boy, and have done, in all things, the reverse of what I advised you. Therefore, I know I was wrong. We may sneer and speak of poetry when the words proceed from another, my boy; but, as inevitable as death, there comes to every man the knowledge that he stands accursed of Nature, who hasn't heard the voice of his own child call 'father!'"

He clambered down, leaving the speechless Ole sprawling on the wagon-seat. Back in his own wagon, he smiled broadly to himself.

"Strange, how easily the apple falls when it's ripe," he soliloquized.

They drove on clear to the mill without another word; without even a grin from the broad-faced Ole, who sat in ponderous thought in the wagon ahead. To a nature such as his the infrequency of a new idea gives it the force of a cataclysm; during its presence, obliterating everything else.

It was nearly noon when they reached the narrow fringe of trees and underbrush--deciduous and wind-tortured all--which bordered the big, muddy, low-lying Missouri; and soon they could hear the throb of the engine at the mill, and the swish of the saw through the green lumber; a sound that heard near by, inevitably carries the suggestion of scalpel and living flesh. Nothing but green timber was sawed thereabout in those days. The country was settling rapidly, lumber was imperative, and available timber very, very limited.

Returning, the heavy loads grumbled slowly along, so slowly that it was nearly evening, and their shadows preceded them by rods when they reached the little prairie town. They stopped to water their teams; and Ole, true to the instincts of his plebeian ancestry, went in search of a glass of beer. He returned, quickly, his face very red.

"A fellow in there is talking about--about Mrs. Maurice," he blurted.

"In the saloon, Ole?"

The Swede repeated the story, watching the tall man from the corner of his eye.

A man, very drunk, was standing by the bar, and telling how, in coming to town, he had seen a buggy drive away from the Maurice home very fast. He had thought it was the doctor's buggy and had stopped in to see if any one was sick.

The fellow had grinned here and drank some more, before finishing the story; the surrounding audience winking at each other meanwhile, and drinking in company.

Then he went on to tell how Camilla Maurice had sat just inside the doorway, her face in her hands, sobbing,--so hard she hadn't noticed him; and--and--it wasn't the doctor who had been there at all!

Ichabod had been holding a pail of water so that a horse might drink. At the end he motioned Ole very quietly, to take his place.

"Finish watering them, and--wait for me, please."

It was far from what the Swede had expected; but he accepted the task, obediently.

The only saloon of the town stood almost exactly opposite Hans Becher's place, flush with the street. A long, low building, communicating with the outer world by one door--sans glass--its single window in front and at the rear lit it but imperfectly at midday, and now at early evening made faces almost indistinguishable, and cast kindly shadow over the fly specks and smoke stains of a low roof. A narrow pine bar, redolent of tribute absorbed from innumerable passing "schooners," stretched the entire length of the room at one side; and back of it, in shirt sleeves and stained apron, presided the typical bar-keeper of the frontier. All this Ichabod saw as he stepped inside; then, himself in shadow, he studied the group before him.

Railroad and cattle men, mostly, made up the gathering, with a scant sprinkling of farmers and others unclassified. A big, ill-dressed fellow was repeating the tale of scandal for the benefit of a newcomer; the narrative moving jerkily over hiccougs, like hurdles.

"--I drew up to th' house quick, an' went up th' path quiet like,"--he tapped thunderously on the bar with a heavy glass for silence--"quiet--sh-h--like; an' when I come t' th' door, ther' 't was open, an'--as I hope--hope t' die,... drink on me, b'ys, aller y'--set 'm up, Barney ol' b'y, m' treat,... hope t' die, ther' she sat, like this--" He looked around mistily for a chair, but none was convenient, and he slid flat to the floor in their midst, his face in his hands, blubbering dismally in imitation.... "Sat (hic) like this; rockin' an' moanin' n' callin' his name: Asa--Asa--Asa--(hic) Arnold--'shure 's I'm a sinner she--"

He did not finish. Very suddenly the surrounding group had scattered, and he peered up through maudlin tears to learn the cause. One man alone stood above him. The room had grown still as a church.

The drunken one blinked his watery eyes and showed his yellow teeth in a convivial grin.

"G'd evnin', pard.... Serve th'--th' gem'n, Barney; m' treat." Again the teeth obtruded. "Was jes'--"

"Get up!"

He of the story winked harder than before.

"Bless m'--" He paused for an expletive, hiccougged, and forgetting what had caused the halt, stumbled on:--"Didn' rec'gniz' y' b'fore. Shake, ol' boy. S--sh-sorry for y'." Tears rose copiously. "Tough--when feller's wife--"

Interrupting suddenly a muffled sound like the distant exhaust of a big engine--the meeting of a heavy boot with an obstacle on the floor. "Get up!"

A very mountain of human brawn resolved itself upward; a hand on its hips; a curse on its lips.



"You'll apologize."

"You damned lantern-faced--" No hiccough now, but a pause from pure physical impotence, pending a doubtful struggle against a half-dozen men.

"Order, gentlemen!" demanded the bar-keeper, adding emphasis by hammering a heavy bottle on the bar.

"Let him go," commanded Ichabod very quietly; but they all heard through the confusion. "Let him go."

The country was by no means the wild West of the story-papers, but it was primitive, and no man thought, then, of preventing the obviously inevitable.

Ichabod held up his hand, suggestively, imperatively, and the crowd fell back, silent,--leaving him facing the big man.

"You'll apologize!" The thin jaw showed clear, through the shade of brown stubble on Ichabod's face.

For answer, the big man leaning on the bar exhibited his discolored teeth and breathed hard.

"How shall it be?" asked Ichabod.

A grimy hand twitched toward a grimier hip.

"You've seen the likes of this--"

Ichabod turned toward the spectators.

"Will any man lend me--"

"Here--"

"Here--"

"And give us a little light."

"Outside," suggested the saloon-keeper.

"We're not advertising patent medicine," blazed Ichabod, and the lamps were lit immediately.

Once more the long-visaged man appealed to the group lined up now against the bar.

"Gentlemen--I never carried a revolver a half-hour in my life. Is it any more than fair that I name the details?"

"Name 'm and be quick," acquiesced his big opponent before the others could speak.

"Thanks, Mr. Duggin," with equal swiftness. "These, then, are the conditions." For three seconds, that seemed a minute, Ichabod looked steadily between his adversary's bushy eyebrows. "The conditions," he repeated, "are, that starting from opposite ends of the room, we don't fire until our toes touch in the middle line."

"Good!" commended a voice; but it was not big Duggin who spoke.

"I'll see that it's done, too,"--added a listening cattleman, grasping Ichabod by the hand.

"And I."

The building had been designed as a bowling-alley and was built the entire length of the lot. With an alacrity born of experience, the long space opposite the bar was cleared, and the belligerents stationed one at either end, their faces toward the wall. Midway between them a heavy line had been drawn with chalk, and beside it stood a half-dozen grim men, their hands resting suggestively on their hips. The room was again very quiet, and from out-of-doors penetrated the shrill sound of a schoolboy whistling "Annie Laurie" with original variations. So exotic seemed the entire scene in its prairie setting, that it might have been transferred bodily from the stage of a distant theatre and set down here,--by mistake.

"Now," directed a voice. "You understand, men. You're to face and walk to the line. When your feet touch--fire; and," warningly--"remember, not before. Ready, gentlemen. Turn."

Ichabod faced about, the cocked revolver in his hand, the name Asa Arnold singing in his ears. A terrible cold-white anger was in his heart against the man opposite, who had publicly caused the resurrection of this hated, buried thing. For a moment it blotted out all other sensations; then, rushing, crowding came other thoughts,--vision from boyhood down. In the space of seconds, faded scenes of the dead past took on sudden color and as suddenly vanished. Faces, he had forgotten for years, flashed instantaneously into view. Voices long hushed in oblivion, re-embodied, spoke in accents as familiar as his own. Inwardly he was seething with the myriad shifting pictures of a drowning man. Outwardly he walked those half-score steps to the line, unflinchingly; came to certain death,--and waited: personification of all that is cool and deliberate--of the sudden abundant nerve in emergencies which comes only to the highly evolved.

Duggin, the big man, turned likewise at the word and came part way swiftly; then stopped, his face very pale. Another step he took, with another pause, and with great drops of perspiration gathering on his face, and on the backs of his hands. Yet another start, and he came very near; so near that he gazed into the blue of Ichabod's eyes. They seemed to him now devil's eyes, and he halted, looking at them, fingering the weapon in his hand, his courage oozing at every pore.

Out of those eyes and that long, thin face stared death; not hot, sudden death, but nihility, cool, deliberate, that waited for one! The big beads on his forehead gathered in drops and ran down his cheeks. He tried to move on, but his legs only trembled beneath him. The hopeless, unreasoning terror of the frightened animal, the raw recruit, the superstitious negro, was upon him. The last fragment of self-respect, of bravado even, was in tatters. No object on earth, no fear of hereafter, could have made him face death in that way, with those eyes looking into his.

The weapon shook from Duggin's hand to the floor,--with a sound like the first clatter of gravel on a coffin lid; and in abasement absolute he dropped his head; his hands nerveless, his jaw trembling.

"I beg your pardon--and your wife's," he faltered.

"It was all a lie? You were drunk?" Ichabod crossed the line, standing over him.

A rustle and a great snort of contempt went around the room; but Duggin still felt those terrible eyes upon him.

"I was very drunk. It was all a lie."

Without another word Ichabod turned away, and almost immediately the other men followed, the door closing behind them. Only the bar-keeper stood impassive, watching.

That instant the red heat of the liquor returned to the big man's brain and he picked up the revolver. Muttering, he staggered over to the bar.

"D--n him--the hide-faced--" he cursed. "Gimme a drink, Barney. Whiskey, straight."

"Not a drop."

"What?"

"Never another drop in my place so long as I live."

"Barney, damn you!"

"Get out! You coward!"

"But, Barney--"

"Not another word. Go."

Again Duggin was sober as he stumbled out into the evening.

Ichabod moved slowly up the street, months aged in those last few minutes. Reaction was inevitable, and with it the future instead of the present, stared him in the face. He had crowded

the lie down the man's throat, but well he knew it had been useless. The story was true, and it would spread; no power of his could prevent. He could not deceive himself, even. That name! Again the white anger born of memory, flooded him. Curses on the name and on the man who had spoken it! Why must the fellow have turned coward at the last moment? Had they but touched feet over the line--

Suddenly Ichabod stopped, his hands pressed to his head. Camilla, home--alone! And he had forgotten! He hurried back to the waiting Swede, an anathema that was not directed at another, hot on his lips.

"All ready, Ole," he announced, clambering to the seat.

The boy handed up the lines lingeringly.

"Here, sir." Then uncontrollable, long-repressed curiosity broke the bounds of deference. "You--heard him, sir?"

"Yes."

Ole edged toward his own wagon.

"It wasn't so?"

"Duggin swore it was a lie."

"He--"

"He swore it was false, I say."

They drove out into the prairie and the night; the stars looking down, smiling, as in the morning which was so long ago, the man had smiled,--looking upward.

"Tiny, tiny mortal," they twinkled, each to the other. "So small and hot, and rebellious. Tiny, tiny, mortal!"

But the man covered his face with his hands, shutting them out.

CHAPTER VI--BY A CANDLE'S FLAME

Asa Arnold sat in the small upstairs room at the hotel of Hans Becher. It was the same room that Ichabod and Camilla had occupied when they first arrived; but he did not know that. Even had he known, however, it would have made slight difference; nothing could have kept them more constantly in his mind than they were at this time. He had not slept any the night before; a fact which would have spoken loudly to one who knew him well; and this morning he was very tired. He lounged low in the oak chair, his feet on the bed, the usual big cigar in his mouth.

This morning, the perspective of the little man was anything but normal. Worse than that, he could not reduce it to the normal, try as he might.

His meeting with Camilla yesterday had produced a deep and abiding shock; for either of them to have been so moved signified the stirring of dangerous forces. They--and especially himself--who had always accepted life, even crises, so calmly; who had heretofore laughed at all display of emotion--for them to have acted as they had, for them to have spoken to each other the things they had spoken, the things they could not forget, that he never could forgive--it was unbelievable! It upset all the established order of things!

His anger of yesterday against Camilla had died out. She was not to blame; she was a woman, and women were all alike. He had thought differently before; that she was an exception; but now he knew better. One and all they were mere puppets of emotion, and fickle.

In a measure, though, as he had excused Camilla he had incriminated Ichabod. Ichabod was the guilty one, and a man. Ichabod had filched from him his possession of most value; and without even the form of a by-your-leave. The incident of last evening at the saloon (for he had heard of it in the hour, as had every one in the little town) had but served to make more implacable his resentment. By the satire of circumstances it had come about that he again, Asa Arnold, had been the cause of another's defending the honor of his own wife,--for she was his wife as yet,--and that other, the defender, was Ichabod Maurice!

The little man's face did not change at the thought. He only smoked harder, until the room was blue; but though he did not put the feeling in words even to himself, he knew in the depths of his own mind that the price of that last day was death. Whether it was his own death, or the death of Ichabod, he did not know; he did not care; but that one of them must die was inevitable. Horrible as was the thought, it had no terror for him, now. He wondered that it did not have; but, on the contrary, it seemed to him very ordinary, even logical--as one orders a dinner when he is hungry.

He lit another cigar, calmly. It was this very imperturbability of the little man which made him terrible. Like a great movement of Nature, it was awful from its very resistlessness; its imperviousness to appeal. Steadily, as he had lit the cigar, he smoked until the air became bluer than before. In a ghastly way, he was trying to decide whose death it should be,--as one decides a winter's flitting, whether to Florida or California; only now the question was: should it be suicide, or,--as in the saloon yesterday,--leave the decision to Chance? For the time the personal equation was eliminated; the man weighed the evidence as impartially as though he were deciding the fate of another.

He sat long and very still; until even in the daylight the red cigar-end grew redder in the haze.

Without being conscious of the fact, he was probably doing the most unselfish thinking of his life. What the result of that thought would have been no man will ever know, for of a sudden, interrupting, Hans Becher's round face appeared in the doorway.

"Ichabod Maurice to see you," coughed the German, obscured in the cloud of smoke which passed out like steam through the opening.

It cannot be said that Asa Arnold's face grew impassive; it was that already. Certain it was, though, that behind the mask there occurred, at that moment, a revolution. Born of it, the old mocking smile sprang to his lips.

"The devil fights for his own," he soliloquized. "I really believe I,"--again the smile,--"I was about to make a sacrifice."

"Sir?"

"Thank you, Hans."

The German's jaw dropped in inexpressible surprise.

"Sir?" he repeated.

"You made a decision for me, then. Thank you."

"I do not you understand."

"Tell Mr. Maurice I shall be pleased to see him."

The round face disappeared from the door.

"*Donnerwetter!*" commented the little landlord in the safe seclusion of the stairway. Later, in relating the incident to Minna, he tapped his forehead, suggestively.

Ichabod climbed the stair alone. "To your old room," Hans had said; and Ichabod knew the place well. He knocked on the panel, a voice answered: "Come," and he opened the door. Arnold had thrown away his cigar and opened the window. The room was clearing rapidly.

Ichabod stepped inside and closed the door carefully behind him. A few seconds he stood holding it, then swung it open quickly and glanced down the hallway. Answering, there was a sudden, scuttling sound, not unlike the escape of frightened rats, as Hans Becher precipitately disappeared. The tall man came back and for the second time slowly closed the door.

Asa Arnold had neither moved nor spoken since that first word,--"come"; and the self-invited visitor read the inaction correctly. No man, with the knowledge Ichabod possessed, could have misunderstood the challenge in that impassive face. No man, a year ago, would have accepted that challenge more quickly. Now--But God only knew whether or no he would forget,--now.

For a minute, which to an onlooker would have seemed interminable, the two men faced each other. Up from the street came the ring of a heavy hammer on a sweet-voiced anvil, as Jim Donovan, the blacksmith, sharpened anew the breaking ploughs which were battling the prairie sod for bread. In the street below, a group of farmers were swapping yarns, an occasional chorus of guffaws interrupting to punctuate the narrative. The combatants heard it all, as one hears the drone of the cicada on a sleepy summer day; at the moment, as a mere colorless background which later, Time, the greater adjuster, utilizes to harmonize the whole memory.

Ichabod had been standing; now he sat down upon the bed, his long legs stretched out before him.

"It would be useless for us to temporize," he initiated. "I've intruded my presence in order to ask you a question." The long fingers locked slowly over his knees. "What is your object here?"

The innate spirit of mockery sprang to the little man's face.

"You're mistaken," he smiled; "so far mistaken, that instead of your visit being an intrusion, I expected you"--an amending memory came to him--"although I wasn't looking for you quite so soon, perhaps." He paused for an instant, and the smile left his lips.

"As to the statement of object. I think"--slowly--"a disinterested observer would have put the question you ask into my mouth." He stared his tall visitor up and down critically, menacingly. Of a sudden, irresistibly, a very convulsion shot over his face. "God, man, you're brazen!" he commented cumulatively.

Ichabod had gambled with this man in the past, and had seen him lose half he possessed without the twitch of an eyelid. A force which now could cause that sudden change of expression--no man on earth knew, better than Ichabod, its intensity. Perhaps a shade of the same feeling crept into his own answering voice.

"We'll quarrel later, if you wish,"--swiftly. "Neither of us can afford to do so now. I ask you again, what are your intentions?"

"And I repeat, the question is by right mine. It's not I who've changed my name and--and in other things emulated the hero of the yellow-back."

Ichabod's face turned a shade paler, though his answer was calm.

"We've known each other too well for either to attempt explanation or condemnation. You wish me to testify first." The long fingers unclasped from over his knee. "You know the story of the past year: it's the key to the future."

A smile, sardonic, distinctive, lifted the tips of Arnold's big moustaches.

"Your faith in your protecting gods is certainly beautiful."

Ichabod nursed a callous spot on one palm.

"I understand,"--very slowly. "At least, you'll answer my question now, perhaps," he suggested.

"With pleasure. You intimate the future will be but a repetition of the past. It'll be my endeavor to give that statement the lie."

"You insist on quarrelling?"

"I insist on but one thing,"--swiftly. "That you never again come into my sight, or into the sight of my wife."

One of Ichabod's long hands extended in gesture.

"And I insist you shall never again use the name of Camilla Maurice as your wife."

The old mocking smile sprang to Asa Arnold's face.

"Unconsciously, you're amusing," he derided. "The old story of the mouse who forbids the cat.... You forget, man, she is my wife."

Ichabod stood up, seemingly longer and gaunter than ever before.

"Good God, Arnold," he flashed, "haven't you the faintest element of pride, or of consistency in your make-up? Is it necessary for a woman to tell you more than once that she hates you? By your own statement your marriage, even at first, was merely of convenience; but even if this weren't so, every principle of the belief you hold releases her. Before God, or man, you haven't the slightest claim, and you know it."

"And you--"

"I love her."

Asa Arnold did not stir, but the pupils of his eyes grew wider, until the whole eye seemed black.

"You fool!" he accented slowly. "You brazen egoist! Did it never occur to you that others than yourself could love?"

Score for the little man. Ichabod had been pinked first.

"You dare tell me to my face you loved her?"

"I do."

"You lie!" blazed Ichabod. "Every word and action of your life gives you the lie!"

Not five minutes had passed since he came in and already he had forgotten!

Asa Arnold likewise was upon his feet and they two faced each other,--a bed length between; in their minds the past and future a blank, the present with its primitive animal hate blazing in their eyes.

"You know what it means to tell me that." Arnold's voice was a full note higher than usual. "You'll apologize?"

"Never. It's true. You lied, and you know you lied."

The surrounding world turned dark to the little man, and the dry-goods box with the tin dipper on its top, danced before his eyes. For the first time in his memory he felt himself losing self-control, and by main force of will he turned away to the window. For the instant all the savage of his nature was on the surface, and he could fairly feel his fingers gripping at the tall man's throat.

A moment he stood in the narrow south window, full in the smiling irony of Nature's sunshine; but only a moment. Then the mocking smile that had become an instinctive part of his nature spread over his face.

"I see but one way to settle this difficulty," he intimated.

A taunt sprang to Ichabod's tongue, but was as quickly repressed.

"There is but one, unless--" with meaning pause.

"I repeat, there is but one."

Ichabod's long face held like wood.

"Consider yourself, then, the challenged party."

They were both very calm, now; the immediate exciting cause in the mind of neither. It seemed as if they had been expecting this time for years, had been preparing for it.

"Perhaps, as yesterday, in the saloon?" The points of the big moustaches twitched ironically. "I promise you there'll be no procrastination as--at certain cases recorded."

The mockery, malice inspired, was cleverly turned, and Ichabod's big chin protruded ominously, as he came over and fairly towered above the small man.

"Most assuredly it'll not be as yesterday. If we're going to reverse civilization, we may as well roll it away back. We'll settle it alone, and here."

Asa Arnold smiled up into the blue eyes.

"You'd prefer to make the adjustment with your hands, too, perhaps? There'd be less risk,

considering--" He stopped at the look on the face above his. No man *vis-à-vis* with Ichabod Maurice ever made accusation of cowardice. Instead, instinctive sarcasm leaped to his lips.

"Not being of the West, I don't ordinarily carry an arsenal with me, in anticipation of such incidents as these. If you're prepared, however,--" and he paused again.

Ichabod turned away; a terrible weariness and disgust of it all--of life, himself, the little man,--in his face. A tragedy would not be so bad, but this lingering comedy of death--One thing alone was in his mind: to have it over, and quickly.

"I didn't expect--this, either. We'll find another way."

He glanced about the room. A bed, the improvised commode, a chair, a small table with a book upon it, and a tallow candle--an idea came to him, and his search terminated.

"I may--suggest--" he hesitated.

"Go on."

Ichabod took up the candle, and, with his pocket-knife, cut it down until it was a mere stub in the socket, then lit a match and held the flame to the wick, until the tallow sputtered into burning.

"You can estimate when that light will go out?" he intimated impassively.

Asa Arnold watched the tall man, steadily, as the latter returned the candle to the table and drew out his watch.

"I think so," *sotto voce*.

Ichabod returned to his seat on the bed.

"You are not afraid, perhaps, to go into the dark alone?"

"No."

"By your own hand?"

"No," again, very slowly. Arnold understood now.

"You swear?" Ichabod flashed a glance with the question.

"I swear."

"And I."

A moment they both studied the sputtering candle.

"It'll be within fifteen minutes," ranted Ichabod.

Arnold drew out his watch slowly.

"It'll be longer."

That was all. Each had made his choice; a trivial matter of one second in the candle's life would decide which of these two men would die by his own hand.

For a minute there was no sound. They could not even hear their breathing. Then Arnold cleared his throat.

"You didn't say when the loser must pay his debt," he suggested.

Ichabod's voice in answer was a trifle husky.

"It won't be necessary." A vision of the future flashed, sinister, inevitable. "The man who loses won't care to face the necessity long."

Five minutes more passed. Down the street the blacksmith was hammering steadily. Beneath the window the group of farmers had separated; their departing footsteps tapping into distance and silence.

Minna went to the street door, calling loudly for Hans, Jr., who had strayed,--and both men started at the sound. The quick catch of their breathing was now plainly audible.

Arnold shifted in his chair.

"You swear--" his voice rang unnaturally sharp, and he paused to moisten his throat,--"you swear before God you'll abide by this?"

"I swear before God," repeated Ichabod slowly.

A second, and the little man followed in echo.

"And I--I swear, I, too, will abide."

Neither man remembered that one of this twain, who gave oath before the Deity, was an agnostic, the other an atheist!

A lonely south wind was rising, and above the tinkle of the blacksmith's hammer there sounded the tap of the light shade as it flapped in the wind against the window-pane. Low, drowsy, moaning,--typical breath of prairie,--it droned through the loosely built house, with sound louder, but not unlike the perpetual roar of a great sea-shell.

Ten minutes passed, and the men sat very still. Both their faces were white, and in the angle of the jaw of each the muscles were locked hard. Ichabod was leaning near the candle. It sputtered and a tiny globule of hot tallow struck his face. He winced and wiped the drop off quickly.

Observing, Arnold smiled and opened his lips as if to make comment; then closed them suddenly, and the smile passed.

Two minutes more the watches ticked off; very, very slowly. Neither of the men had thought, beforehand, of this time of waiting. Big drops of sweat were forming on both their faces, and in the ears of each the blood sang madly. A haze, as from the dropping of a shade, seemed to have formed and hung over the room, and in unison sounds from without acquired a certain faintness, like that born of distance. Through it all the two men sat motionless, watching the candle and the time, as the fascinated bird watches its charmer; as the subject watches the hypnotist,—as if the passive exercise were the one imperative thing in the world.

“Thirteen minutes.”

Unconsciously, Arnold was counting aloud. The flame was very low, now, and he started to move his chair closer, then sank back, a smile, almost ghastly, upon his lips. The blaze had reached the level of the socket, and was growing smaller and smaller. Two minutes yet to burn! He had lost.

He tried to turn his eyes away, but they seemed fastened to the spot, and he powerless. It was as though death, from staring him in the face, had suddenly gripped him hard. The panorama of his past life flashed through his mind. The thoughts of the drowning man, of the miner who hears the rumble of crumbling earth, of the prisoner helpless and hopeless who feels the first touch of flame,—common thought of all these were his; and in a space of time which, though seeming to him endless, was in reality but seconds.

Then came the duller reaction and the events of the last few minutes repeated themselves, impersonally, spectacularly,—as though they were the actions of another man; one for whom he felt very sorry. He even went into the future and saw this same man lying down with a tiny bottle in his hand, preparing for the sleep from which there would be no awakening,—the sleep which, in anticipation, seemed so pleasant.

Concomitant with this thought the visionary shaded into the real, and there came the determination to act at once, this very afternoon, as soon as Ichabod had gone. He even felt a little relief at the decision. After all, it was so much simpler than if he had won, for then—then—He laughed gratingly at the thought. Cursed if he would have known what to have done, then!

The sound roused him and he looked at his watch. A minute had passed, fourteen from the first and the flame still sputtered. Was it possible after all—after he had decided—that he was not to lose, that the decision was unnecessary? There was not in his mind the slightest feeling of personal elation at the prospect, but rather a sense of injury that such a scurvy trick should be foisted off upon him. It was like going to a funeral and being confronted, suddenly, with the grinning head of the supposed dead projecting through the coffin lid. It was unseemly!

Only a minute more: a half now—yes, he would win. For the first time he felt that his forehead was wet, and he mopped his face with his handkerchief jerkily; then sank back in the chair, instinctively shooting forward his cuffs in motion habitual.

“Fifteen seconds.” There could be no question now of the result; and the outside world, banished for the once, returned. The blacksmith was hammering again, the strokes two seconds apart, and the fancy seized the little man to finish counting by the ring of the anvil.

“Twelve, ten, eight,” he counted slowly. “Six” was forming on the tip of the tongue when of a sudden the tiny flame veered far over toward the holder, sputtered and went out. For the first time in those interminable minutes, Arnold looked at his companion. Ichabod’s face was within a foot of the table, and in line with the direction the flame had veered. Swift as thought the small man was on his feet, white anger in his face.

“You blew that candle!” he challenged.

Ichabod’s head dropped into his hands. An awful horror of himself fell crushingly upon him; an abhorrence of the selfishness that could have forgotten—what he forgot; and for so long,—almost irrevocably long. Mingled with this feeling was a sudden thanksgiving for the boon of which he was unworthy; the memory at the eleventh hour, in time to do as he had done before his word was passed. Arnold strode across the room, his breath coming fast, his eyes flashing fire. He shook the tall man by the shoulder roughly.

“You blew that flame, I say!”

Ichabod looked up at the furious, dark face almost in surprise.

“Yes, I blew it,” he corroborated absently.

“It would have burned longer.”

“Perhaps—I don’t know.”

Arnold moved back a step and the old smile, mocking, maddening, spread over his face; tilting, perpendicular, the tips of the big moustaches.

“After all—” very slowly—“after all, then, you’re a coward.”

The tall man stood up; six-feet-two, long, bony, immovable: Ichabod himself again.

“You know that’s a lie.”

“You’ll meet me again,—another way, then?”

“No, never!”

"I repeat, you're a cursed coward."

"I'd be a coward if I did meet you," quickly.

Something in Ichabod's voice caught the little man's ear and held him silent, as, for a long half-minute, the last time in their lives, the two men looked into each other's eyes.

"You'll perhaps explain." Arnold's voice was cold as death. "You have a reason?"

Ichabod walked slowly over to the window and leaned against the frame. Standing there, the spring sunshine fell full upon his face, drawing clear the furrows at the angles of his eyes and the gray threads of his hair. He paused a moment, looking out over the broad prairie shimmering indistinctly in the heat, and the calm of it all took hold of him, shone in his face.

"I've a reason," very measuredly, "but it's not that I fear death, or you." He took up his hat and smoothed it absently. "In future I shall neither seek, nor avoid you. Do what you wish--and God judge us both." Without a glance at the other man, he turned toward the door.

Arnold moved a step, as if to prevent him going.

"I repeat, it's my right to know why you refuse." His feet shifted uneasily upon the floor. "Is it because of another--Eleanor?"

Ichabod paused.

"Yes," very slowly. "It's because of Eleanor--*and* another."

The tall man's hand was upon the knob, but this time there was no interruption. An instant he hesitated; then absently, slowly, the door opened and closed. A moment later indistinct, descending steps sounded on the stairway.

Alone, Asa Arnold stood immovable, looking blindly at the closed door, listening until the tapping feet had passed into silence. Then, in a motion indescribable, of pain and of abandon, he sank back into the single chair.

His dearest enemy would have pitied the little man at that moment!

CHAPTER VII--THE PRICE OF THE LEAP

In the chronology of the little town, day followed day, as monotonously as ticks the tall clock on the wall. Only in multiple they merged into the seasons which glided so smoothly, one into the other, that the change was unnoticed, until it had taken place.

Thus three months passed by, and man's work for the year was nearly done. The face of the prairie had become one of many colors; eternal badge of civilization as opposed to Nature, who paints each season with its own hue. Beside the roadways great, rank sunflowers turned their glaring yellow faces to the light. In every direction stretched broad fields of flax; unequally ripening, their color scheme ranging from sky blue of blossoms to warm browns of maturity. Blotches of sod corn added here and there a dash of green to the picture. Surrounding all, a setting for all, the unbroken virgin prairie, mottled green and brown, stretched, smiling, harmonious, beneficent; a land of promise and of plenty for generations yet unborn.

All through the long, hot summer Asa Arnold had stayed in town, smoking a big pipe in front of the hotel of Hans Becher. Indolent, abnormally indolent, a stranger seeing him thus would have commented; but, save Hans the confiding, none other of the many interested observers were deceived. No man merely indolent sleeps neither by night nor by day; and it seemed the little man never slept. No man merely indolent sits wide-eyed hour after hour, gazing blankly at the earth beneath his feet--and uttering never a word. Brooding, not dreaming, was Asa Arnold; brooding over the eternal problem of right and wrong. And, as passed the slow weeks, he moved back--back on the trail of civilization, back until Passion and not Reason was the god enthroned; back until one thought alone was with him morning, noon, and night,--and that thought preponderant, overmastering, deadly hate.

Observant Curtis, the doctor, shrugged his shoulders.

"The old, old trail," he satirized.

It was to Bud Evans, the little agent, that he made the observation.

"Which has no ending," completed the latter.

The doctor shrugged afresh.

"That has one inevitable termination," he refuted.

"Which is--"

"Madness--sheer madness."

The agent was silent a moment.

"And the end of that?" he suggested.

Curtis pursed his lips.

"Tragedy, or a strait-jacket. The former, in this instance."

Evans was silent longer than before.

"Do you really mean that?" he queried at last, significantly.

"I've warned Maurice,"--sententiously. "I can do no more."

"And he?" quickly.

"Thanked me."

"That was all?"

"That was all."

The two friends looked at each other, steadily; yet, though they said no more, each knew the thought of the other, each knew that in future no move of Asa Arnold's would pass unnoticed, unchallenged.

Again, weeks, a month, passed without incident. It was well along in the fall and of an early evening that a vague rumor of the unusual passed swiftly, by word of mouth, throughout the tiny town. Only a rumor it was, but sufficient to set every man within hearing in motion.

On this night Hans Becher had eaten his supper and returned to the hotel office, as was his wont, for an evening smoke, when, without apparent reason, Bud Evans and Jim Donovan, the blacksmith, came quietly in and sat down.

"Evening," they nodded, and looked about them.

A minute later Dr. Curtis and Hank Judge, the machine man, dropped unostentatiously into chairs. They likewise muttered "Evening," and made observation from under their hat-brims. Others followed rapidly, until the room was full and dark figures waited outside. At last Curtis spoke.

"Your boarder, Asa Arnold, where is he, Hans?"

The unsuspecting German blew a cloud of smoke.

"He a while ago went out." Then, as an afterthought: "He will return soon."

Silence once more for a time, and a steadily thickening haze of smoke in the room.

"Did he have supper, Hans?" queried Bud Evans, impatiently.

Again the German's face expressed surprise.

"No, it is waiting for him. He went to shoot a rabbit he saw."

The men were on their feet.

"He took a gun, Hans?"

"A rifle, to be sure." The mild brown eyes glanced up reproachfully. "A man does not go hunting without--... What is this!" he completed in consternation, as, finding himself suddenly alone, he hurried outside and stood confusedly scratching his bushy poll, in the block of light surrounding the open doorway.

The yard was deserted. As one snuffs a candle, the men had vanished. Hans' pipe had gone out and he went inside for a match. Though the stars fell, the German must needs smoke. Only a minute he was gone, but during that time a group of horsemen had gathered in the street. Others were coming across lots, and still others were emerging from the darkness of alleys. Some were mounted; some led by the rein, wiry little bronchos. Watching, it almost seemed to the German that they sprang from the ground.

"Are you all ready?" called a voice, Bud Evans' voice.

"Here--"

"Here--"

"All ready?"

"Yes--"

"We're off, then."

There was a sudden, confused trampling, as of cattle in stampede; a musical creaking of heavy saddles; a knife-like swish of many quirts through the air; a chorus of dull, chesty groans as the rowels of long spurs bit the flanks of the mustangs, and they were gone--down the narrow street, out upon the prairie, their hoof beats pattering *diminuendo* into silence; a cloud of dust, grayish in the starlight, marking the way they had taken.

Jim Donovan, the blacksmith, came running excitedly up from a side street. He stopped in front of the hotel, breathlessly. Holding his sides, he followed with his eyes the trail of dust leading out into the night.

"Have they gone?" he panted. "I can't find another horse in town."

"Where is it to?" sputtered the German.

"Have they gone, I say?"

Hans gasped.

"Yes, to be sure."

"They'll never make it." The blacksmith mopped his brow with conviction. "He has an hour's start."

Hans grasped the big man by the coat.

"Who is too late?" he emphasized. "Where are they going?"

Jim Donovan turned about, great pity for such density in his eyes.

"Is it possible you don't understand? It's to Ichabod Maurice's they're going, to tell him of Arnold." The speaker mopped his face anew. "It's useless though. They're too late," he completed.

"But Arnold is not there," protested the German. "He went for a rabbit, out on the breaking. He so told me."

"He lied to you. He's mad. I tell you they're too late," repeated the smith, obstinately.

Hans clung tenaciously to the collar.

"Some one knew and told them?" He pointed in the direction the dust indicated.

"Yes, Bud Evans; but they wouldn't believe him at first, and"--bitterly--"and waited." Donovan shook himself free, and started down the walk. "I'm going to bed," he announced conclusively.

Meanwhile the cloud of dust was moving out over the prairie like the wind. The pace was terrific, and the tough little ponies were soon puffing steadily. Small game, roused from its sleep by the roadside, sprang winging into the night. Once a coyote, surprised, ran a distance confusedly ahead in the roadway; then, an indistinct black ball, it vanished amongst the tall grass.

Well out on the prairie, Bud Evans, the leader, raised in his stirrups and looked ahead. There was no light beyond where the little cottage should be. The rowels of his spur dug anew at the flank of his pony as he turned a voice like a fog-horn back over his shoulder.

"The place is dark, boys," he called. "Hurry."

Answering, a muttering sound, not unlike an approaching storm, passed along the line, and in accompaniment the quirts cut the air anew.

Silent as the grave was the little farmstead when, forty odd minutes from the time of starting, they steamed up at the high fence bounding the yard. One of Ichabod's farm horses whinnied a lone greeting from the barn as they hastily dismounted and swarmed within the inclosure.

"We're too late," prophesied a voice.

"I'm glad my name's not Arnold, if we are," responded another, threateningly.

Hurrying up the path in advance, the little land-agent stumbled over a soft, dark object, and a curse fell from his lips as he recognized the dead body of the big collie.

"Yes, we're too late," he echoed.

The door of the house swung ajar, creaking upon its hinges; and, as penetrates the advance wave of a flood, the men swarmed through the doorway inside, until the narrow room was blocked. Simultaneously, like torches, lighted matches appeared aloft in their hands, and the tiny whitewashed room flashed into light. As simultaneously there sprang from the mouth of each man an oath, and another, and another. Waiting outside, not a listener but knew the meaning of that sound; and big, hairy faces crowded tightly to the one small window.

For a moment not a man in the line stirred. Death was to them no stranger; but death such as this--

In more than one hand the match burned down until it left a mark like charcoal, and without calling attention. One and all they stood spellbound, their eyes on the floor, their lips unconsciously uttering the speech universal of anger and of horror, the instinctive language of anathema.

On the floor, sprawling, as falls a lifeless body, lay the long Ichabod. On his forehead, almost geometrically near the centre, was a tiny, black spot, around it a lighter red blotch; his face otherwise very white; his hair, on the side toward which he leaned, a little matted; that was all.

Prostrate across him, in an attitude of utter abandon, reposed the body of a woman, soft, graceful, motionless now as that of the man: the body of Camilla Maurice. One hand had held his head and was stained dark. On her lips was another stain, but lighter. The meaning of that last mark came as a flash to the spectators, and the room grew still as the figures on the floor.

Suddenly in the silence the men caught their breath, with the quick guttural note that announces the unexpected. That there was no remaining life they had taken for granted--and Camilla's lips had moved! They stared as at sight of a ghost; all except Curtis, the physician.

"A lamp, men," he demanded, pressing his ear to Camilla's chest.

"Help me here, Evans," he continued without turning. "I think she's fainted is all," and together they carried their burden into the tiny sleeping-room, closing the door behind.

That instant Ole, the Swede, thrust a curious head in at the outer doorway. He had noticed the light and the gathering, and came to ascertain their meaning. Wondering, his big eyes passed around the waiting group and from them to the floor. With that look self-consciousness left him; he crowded to the front, bending over the tall man and speaking his name.

"Mr. Maurice," he called. "Mr. Maurice."

He snatched off his own coat, rolling it under Ichabod's head, and with his handkerchief touched the dark spot on the forehead. It was clotted already and hardening, and realization came to the boy Swede. He stood up, facing the men, the big veins in his throat throbbing.

"Who did this?" he thundered, crouching for a spring like a great dog. "Who did this, I say?"

It was the call to action. In the sudden horror of the tragedy the big fellows had momentarily forgotten their own grim epilogue. Now, at the words, they turned toward the door. But the Swede was in advance, blocking the passage.

"Tell me first who did this thing," he challenged, threateningly.

A hand was laid gently upon his shoulder.

"Asa Arnold, my boy," answered a quiet voice, which continued, in response to a sudden thought, "You live near here; have you seen him to-night?"

The Swede dropped the bar.

"The little man who stays with Hans Becher?"

The questioner nodded.

"Yes, a half-hour ago." The boy-man understood now. "He stopped at my house, and--"

"Which direction did he go?"

Ole stepped outside, his arm stretched over the prairie, white now in the moonlight.

"That way," he indicated. "East."

As there had been quiescence before, now there was action. No charge of cavalry was ever more swift than their sudden departure.

"East, toward Schooner's ranch," was called and repeated as they made their way back to the road; and, following, the wiry little bronchos groaned in unison as the back cinch to each one of the heavy saddles, was, with one accord, drawn tight. Then, widening out upon the reflected whiteness of prairie, there spread a great black crescent. A moment later came silence, broken only by the quivering call of a lone coyote.

Ole watched them out of sight, then turned back to the door; the mood of the heroic passed, once more the timid, retiring Swede. But now he was not alone. Bud Evans was quietly working over the body on the floor, laying it out decently as the quick ever lay out the dead.

"Evans," called the doctor from the bedroom. As the agent responded, Ole heard the smothered cry of a woman in pain.

The big boy hesitated, then sat down on the doorstep. There was nothing now for him to do, and suddenly he felt very tired. His head dropped listlessly into his hands; like a great dog, he waited, watching.

Minutes passed. On the table the oil lamp sputtered and burned lower. Out in the stable the horse repeated its former challenging whinny. Once again through the partition the listener caught the choking wail of pain, and the muffled sound of the doctor's voice in answer.

At last Bud Evans came to the door, his face very white. "Water," he requested, and Ole ran to the well and back. Then, impassive, he sat down again to wait.

Time passed, so long a time it seemed to the watcher that the riders must soon be returning. Finally Evans emerged from the side room, walking absently, his face gray in the lamplight.

The Swede stood up.

"Camilla Maurice, is she hurt?" he asked.

The little agent busied himself making a fire.

"She's dead," he answered slowly.

"Dead, you say?"

"Yes, dead,"--very quietly.

The fire blazed up and lit the room, shining unpityingly upon the face of the man on the floor.

Evans noticed, and drawing off his own coat spread it over the face and hands, covering them from sight; then, uncertain, he returned and sat down, mechanically holding his palms to the blaze.

A moment later Dr. Curtis appeared at the tiny bedroom entrance; and, emerging as the little man had done before him, he closed the door softly behind. In his arms he carried a blanket, carefully rolled. From the depths of its folds, as he slowly crossed the room toward the stove, there escaped a sudden cry, muffled, unmistakable.

The doctor sank down wearily in a chair. Ole, the boy-faced, without a question brought in fresh wood, laying it down on the floor very, very softly.

"Will he--live?" asked Bud Evans, suddenly, with an uncertain glance at the obscuring blanket; and hearing the query, the Swede paused in his work to listen.

The big doctor hesitated, and cleared his throat.

"I think so; though--God forgive me--I hope not." And he cleared his throat again.

JOURNEY'S END

I

"Steve!" It was the girl who spoke, but the man did not seem to hear. He was staring through the window, unseeingly, into the heart of his bitter foe, Winter. He sat silent, helpless.

"Steve!"

At last he awoke.

"Mollie!--girlie!"

An hour had passed since he left the doctor's office to reel and stagger drunkenly through the slush and the sleet, and the icy blasts, which bit cruelly into his very vitals.

Now he and Mollie were alone in the tiny library. Babcock had been warmed, washed, fed. Seemingly without volition on his part, he was before the hard-coal blaze, his feet on the fender, the light carefully shaded from his eyes. Once upon a time--

But Steve Babcock, master mechanic, had not lost his nerve--once upon a time.

"Steve"--the voice was as soft as the wide brown eyes, as the dainty oval chin--"Steve, tell me what it is."

The man's hand, palm outward, dropped wearily, eloquently. That was all.

"But tell me," the girl's chair came closer, so that she might have touched him, "you went to see the doctor?"

"Yes."

"And he--?"

Again the silent, hopeless gesture, more fear-inspiring than words.

"Don't keep me in suspense, please." A small hand was on the man's knee, now, frankly unashamed. "Tell me what he said."

For an instant there was silence, then Babcock shrugged awkwardly, in an effort at nonchalance.

"He said I was--was--" in spite of himself, the speaker paused to moisten his lips--"a dead man."

"Steve!"

Not a word this time; not even a shrug.

"Steve, you--you're not--not joking with me?"

Lower and lower, still in silence, dropped the man's chin.

"Steve," in a steadier voice, "please answer me. You're not joking?"

"Joking!" At last the query had pierced the fear-dulled brain. "Joking! God, no! It's real, real, deadly real, that's what ... Oh, Mollie--!" Instinctively, as a child, the man's head had gone to the girl's lap. Though never before had they spoken of love or of marriage, neither noted the incongruity now. "It's all over. We'll never be married, never again get out into the country together, never even see the green grass next Spring--at least I won't--never.... Oh, Mollie, Mollie!" The man's back rose and fell spasmodically. His voice broke. "Mollie, make me forget; I can't bear to think of it. Can't! Can't!"

Not a muscle of the girl's body stirred; she made no sound. No one in advance would have believed it possible, but it was true. Five minutes passed. The man became quiet.

"Steve," the voice was very even, "what else did the doctor say?"

"Eh?" It was the doddering query of an old man.

The girl repeated the question, slowly, with infinite patience, as though she were speaking to a child.

"What else did the doctor say?"

Her tranquillity in a measure calmed the man.

"Oh, he said a lot of things; but that's all I remember--what I told you. It was the last thing, and he kind of tilted back in his chair. The spring needed oil; it fairly screamed. I can hear it now.

"'Steve Babcock,' said he, 'you've got to go some place where it's drier, where the air's pure and clean and sweet the year round. Mexico's the spot for you, or somewhere in the Far West where you can spend all your time in the open--under the roof of Heaven.'

"He leaned forward, and again that cursed spring interrupted.

"'If you don't go, and go right away,' he said, 'as sure as I'm talking to you, you're a dead man.'"

Babcock straightened, and, leaden-eyed, looked dully into the blaze.

"Those," he whispered, "were his last words."

"And if you do go?"--very quietly.

"He said I had a chance--a fighting chance." Once more the hopeless, deprecatory gesture.

"But what's the use? You know, as well as I, that I haven't a hundred dollars to my name. He might just as well have told me to go to the moon.

"We poor folks are like rats in a trap when they turn the water on--helpless. We--"

Babcock had wandered on, forgetting, for the moment, that it was his own case he was analyzing. Now of a sudden it recurred to him, cumulatively, crushingly and, as before, his head instinctively sought refuge.

"We can't do anything but take our medicine, Mollie--just take our medicine."

Patter, patter sounded the sleet against the window-panes, mingling with the roar of the wind in the chimney, with the short, quick breaths of the man. In silence he reached out, took one of the girl's hands captive, and held it against his cheek.

For a minute--five minutes--she did not stir, did not utter a sound; only the soft oval face tightened until its gentle outlines grew sharp, and the brown skin almost white.

All at once her lips compressed; she had reached a decision.

"Steve, sit up, please; I can talk to you better so." Pityingly, protectingly, she placed an arm around him and drew him close; not as man to maid, but--ah, the pity of it!--as a feeble child to its mother.

"Listen to what I say. To-day is Thursday. Next Monday you are going West, as the doctor orders."

"What--what did you say, Mollie?"

"Next Monday you go West."

"You mean, after all, I'm to have a chance? I'm not going to die like--like a rat?"

For a moment, a swiftly passing moment, it was the old vital Steve who spoke; the Babcock of a year ago; then, in quick recession, the mood passed.

"You don't know what you're talking about, girl. I can't go, I tell you. I haven't the money."

"I'll see that you have the money, Steve."

"You?"

"I've been teaching for eight years, and living at home all the while."

The man, surprised out of his self centredness, looked wonderingly, unbelievably, at her.

"You never told me, Mollie."

"No, I never saw the need before."

The man's look of wonder passed. Another--fearful, dependent, the look of a child in the dark--took its place.

"But--alone, Mollie! A strange land, a strange people, a strange tongue! Oh, I hate myself, girl, hate myself! I've lost my nerve. I can't go alone. I can't."

"You're not going alone, Steve." There was a triumphant note in her voice that thrilled the man through and through. She continued:

"Only this morning--I don't know why I did it; it seems now like Providence pointing the way--I read in the paper about the rich farm lands in South Dakota that are open for settlement. I thought of you at the time, Steve; how such a life might restore your health; but it seemed so impossible, so impracticable, that I soon forgot about it.

"But--Steve--we can each take up a quarter-section--three hundred and twenty acres, altogether. Think of it! We'll soon be rich. There you will have just the sort of outdoor life the doctor says you need."

He looked at her, marvelling.

"Mollie--you don't mean it--now, when I'm--this way!" He arose, his breath coming quick, a deep blot of red in the centre of each cheek. "It can't be true when--when you'd never let me say anything before."

"Yes, Steve, it's true."

She was so calm, so self-possessed and withal so determined, that the man was incredulous.

"That you'll marry me? Say it, Mollie!"

"Yes, I'll marry you."

"Mollie!" He took a step forward, then of a sudden, abruptly halted.

"But your parents," in swift trepidation. "Mollie, they--"

"Don't let's speak of them,"--sharply. Then in quick contrition, her voice softened; once more it struck the maternal note.

"Pardon me, I'm very tired. Come. We have a spare room; you mustn't go home to-night."

The man stopped, coughed, advanced a step, then stopped again.

"Mollie, I can't thank you; can't ever repay you--"

"You mustn't talk of repaying me," she said shyly, her dark face coloring. It was the first time during the interview that she had shown a trace of embarrassment.

"Come," she said, meeting his look again, her hand on the door; "it's getting late. You must not venture out."

A moment longer the man hesitated, then obeyed. Not until he was very near, so near that he could touch her, did a vestige of his former manhood appear. He paused, and their eyes were locked in a soul-searching look. Then all at once his arm was round her waist, his face beside her face.

"Mollie, girl, won't you--just once?"

"No, no--not that! Don't ask it." Passionately the brown hands flew to the brown cheeks, covering them protectingly. But at once came thought, the spirit of sacrifice, and contrition for the involuntary repulse.

"Forgive me, Steve; I'm unaccountable to-night." Her voice, her manner were constrained, subdued. She accepted his injured look without comment, without further defence. She saw the perplexed look on his thin face; then she reached forward--up--and her two soft hands brought his face down to the level of her own.

Deliberately, voluntarily, she kissed him fair upon the lips.

II

The sun was just peering over the rim of the prairie, when Mrs. Warren turned in from the dusty road, picked her way among the browning weeds to the plain, unpainted, shanty-like structure which marked the presence of a homesteader. Except to the east, where stood the tents and shacks of the new railroad's construction gang, not another human habitation broke the dull, monotonous rolling sea of prairie.

Mrs. Warren pounded vigorously upon the rough boards of the door.

A full half-minute she waited; then she glared petulantly at the unresponsive barrier, and pounded upon it again.

Ordinarily she would have waited patiently, for the multitude of duties of one day often found Mrs. Babcock still weary with the dawning of the next--especially since Steve had allied himself with Jack Warren's engineering corps.

Funds had run low, and the two valetudinarians had reached the stage of desperation where they were driven to acknowledge failure, when Jack Warren happened along, in the van of the new railroad.

The work of home-building, from the raw material, had been too much for Steve's enfeebled physique; so it happened that Mollie performed most of his share, as well as all of her own. Yet Steve toiled to the limit of his endurance, and each day, at sundown, flung himself upon his blanket, spread beneath the stars, dog-tired, fairly trembling with weariness. But he soon developed a prodigious appetite, and, after the first few weeks, slept each night like a dead man, until sunrise.

This morning Annie Warren was too full of her errand to pause an instant. She stood a moment listening, one ear to the splintery, unfinished boards, then--

"Mollie," she ventured, "are you awake?"

No answer.

"Mollie"--more insistent, "wake up and let me in."

Still no response.

"Mollie," for the third time, "it is I, Annie; may I enter?"

"Come." The voice was barely audible.

Within the uncomfortably low, dim room the visitor impetuously crossed the earthen floor half-way to a rude bunk built against the wall, then paused, her round, childlike face soberly lengthening.

"Mollie, you have been crying!" she charged, resentfully, as if the act constituted a personal offence. "You can't deceive me. The pillow is soaked, and your eyes are red." She came forward, impulsively, and threw herself on the bed, her arm about the other.

"What is it? Tell me--your friend--Annie."

Beneath the light coverlet, Mollie Babcock made a motion of deprecation, almost of repugnance.

"It is nothing. Please don't pay any attention to me."

"But it *is* something. Am I not your friend?"

For a moment neither spoke. Annie Warren all at once became conscious that the other woman was looking at her in a way she had never done before.

"Assuredly you are my friend, Annie. But just the same, it's nothing." The look altered until it became a smile.

"Tell me, instead, why you are here," Mollie went on. "It is not usual at this time of day."

Annie Warren felt the rebuff, and she was hurt.

"It is nothing." The visitor was on her feet, her voice again resentful; her chin was held high, while her long lashes drooped. "Pardon me for intruding, for--"

"Annie!"

No answer save the quiver of a sensitive red lip.

"Annie, child, pardon me. I wouldn't for the world hurt you; but it is so hard, what you ask." Mollie Babcock rose, now, likewise. "However, if you wish--"

"No, no!" The storm was clearing. "It was all my fault. I know you'd rather not." She had grasped Mollie's arms, and was forcing her backward, toward the bunk, gently, smilingly. "Be still. I've something to tell you. Are you quite ready to listen?"

"Yes, I'm quite ready."

"You haven't the slightest idea what it is? You couldn't even guess?"

"No, I couldn't even guess."

"I'll tell you, then." The plump Annie was bubbling like a child before a well-filled Christmas stocking. "It's Jack: he's coming this very day. A big, fierce Indian brought the letter this morning." She sat down tailor fashion on the end of the bunk. "He nearly ate up Susie--Jack christened her Susie because she's a Sioux--because she wouldn't let him put the letter right into my own hand. That's why I'm up so early."

She looked slyly at the woman on the bed.

"Who do you suppose is coming with him?" she asked.

"I'm sure I don't know," in a tone of not caring, either.

"Guess, Mollie!"

"Steve?"

"Of course--Steve. You knew all the time, only you wouldn't admit it. Oh, I'm so glad! I want to hug some one. Isn't it fine?"

"Yes, fine indeed. But you don't mean that you want to hug Steve?"

"No, goose. You know I meant Jack; but I--" She regarded her friend doubtfully. But Mollie Babcock was dressing rapidly, and her face was averted.

"And Mollie, I didn't tell you all--almost the best. We're going home, Jack says; going right away; this very week, maybe."

For a moment the dressing halted. "I am very glad--for you," said Mollie, in an even voice.

"Glad, for me!" mimickingly, baitingly. "Mollie Babcock, if I didn't know you better, I'd say you were envious."

Mollie said nothing.

"Or weren't glad your husband is coming."

Still no word.

"Or--or--Mollie, what have I done?" Annie cried in dismay. "Don't cry so; I was only joking. Of course you know that I didn't mean that you envied our good luck, or that you wouldn't be crazy to see Steve."

"But it's so. God help me, it's so!"

"Mollie!" Mrs. Warren was aghast. "Forgive me! I'm ashamed of myself!"

"There's nothing to forgive; it's so."

"Please don't." The two were very close, very tense, but not touching. "Don't say any more. I didn't hear--"

"You did hear. And you suspected, or you wouldn't have suggested!"

"Mollie, I never dreamed. I--"

Of a sudden the older woman faced about. Seizing the other by the shoulders, she held her prisoner. She fixed the frightened woman's eyes with a stern look.

"Will you swear that you never knew--that it was mere chance--what you said?"

"Yes."

"You swear you didn't?"--the grip tightened--"you swear it?"

"I swear--oh, you're hurting me!"

Mollie Babcock let her hands drop.

"I believe you"--wearily. "It seemed that everybody knew. God help me!" She sank to the bed, her face in her hands. "I believe I'm going mad!"

"Mollie--Mollie Babcock! You mustn't talk so--you mustn't!" The seconds ticked away. Save for the quick catch of suppressed sobs, not a sound was heard in the mean, austere little room; not

an echo penetrated from the outside world.

Then suddenly the brown head lifted from the pillow, and Mollie faced almost fiercely about.

"You think I am--am mad already." Then, feverishly: "Don't you?"

Helpless at a crisis, Annie Warren could only stand silent, the pink, childish under-lip held tight between her teeth to prevent a quiver. Her fingers played nervously with the filmy lace shawl about her shoulders.

Mollie advanced a step. "Don't you?"

Annie found her voice.

"No, no, no! Oh, Mollie, no, of course not! You--Mollie--" Instinct all at once came to her rescue. With a sudden movement she gathered the woman in her arms, her tender heart quivering in her voice and glistening in her eyes. "Mollie, I can't bear to have you so! I love you, Mollie. Tell me what it is--me--your friend, Annie."

Mollie's lips worked without speech, and Annie became insistent.

"Tell me, Mollie. Let me share the ache at your heart. I love you!"

Here was the crushing straw to one very, very heartsick and very weary. For the first time in her solitary life, Mollie Babcock threw reticence to the winds, and admitted another human being into the secret places of her confidence.

"If you don't think me already mad, you will before I'm through." Like a caged wild thing that can not be still, she was once more on her feet, vibrating back and forth like a shuttle. "I'm afraid of myself at times, afraid of the future. It's like the garret used to be after dark, when we were children: it holds only horrors.

"Child, child!" She paused, her arms folded across her breast, her throat a-throb. "You can't understand--thank God, you never will understand--what the future holds for me. You are going back home; back to your own people, your own life. You've been here but a few months. To you it has been a lark, an outing, an experience. In a few short weeks it will be but a memory, stowed away in its own niche, the pleasant features alone remaining vivid.

"Even, while here, you've never known the life itself. You've had Jack, the novelty of a strange environment, your anticipation of sure release. You are merely like a sightseer, locked for a minute in a prison-cell, for the sake of a new sensation.

"You can't understand, I say. You are this, and I--I am the life-prisoner in the cell beyond, peering at you through the bars, viewing you and your mock imprisonment."

Once more the speaker was in motion, to and fro, to and fro, in the shuttle-trail. "The chief difference is, that the life-prisoner has a hope of pardon; I have none--absolutely none."

"Mollie"--pleadingly, "you mustn't. I'll ask Jack to give Steve a place at home, and you can go--"

"Go!" The bitterness of her heart welled up and vibrated in the word. "Go! We can't go, now or ever. It's death to Steve if we leave. I've got to stay here, month after month, year after year, dragging my life out until I grow gray-haired--until I die!" She halted, her arms tensely folded, her breath coming quick. Only the intensity of her emotion saved the attitude from being histrionic. In a sudden outburst, she fiercely apostrophized:

"Oh, Dakota! I hate you, I hate you! Because I am a woman, I hate you! Because I would live in a house, and not in this endless dreary waste of a dead world, I hate you! Because your very emptiness and solitude are worse than a prison, because the calls of the living things that creep and fly over your endless bosom are more mournful than death itself, I hate you! Because I would be free, because I respect sex, because of the disdain for womanhood that dwells in your crushing silence, I hate--oh, my God, how I hate you!" She threw her arms wide, in a frantic gesture of rebellion.

"I want but this," she cried passionately: "to be free; free, as I was at home, in God's country. And I can never be so here--never, never, never! Oh, Annie, I'm homesick--desperately, miserably homesick! I wish to Heaven I were dead!"

Annie Warren, child-woman that she was, was helpless, when face to face with the unusual. Her senses were numbed, paralyzed. One thought alone suggested itself.

"But"--haltingly--"for Steve's sake--certainly, for him--"

"Stop! As you love me, stop!" Again no suggestion of the histrionic in the passionate voice. "Don't say that now. I can't stand it. I--oh, I don't mean that! Forget that I said it. I'm not responsible this morning. Please leave me."

She was prostrate on the bed at last, her whole body a-tremble.

"But--Mollie--"

"Go--go!" cried Mollie, wildly. "Please go!"

Awed to silence, Annie Warren stared helplessly a moment, then gathered her shawl about her shoulders, and slipped silently away.

structure which represented home for her, when Steve came upon her.

She was not looking for him. He had been gone so long, out there somewhere, in that abomination of desolation, building a railroad, that the morbid fancy had come to dwell with her that the prairie had swallowed him, and that she would never see him more. So he came upon her unawares.

The buffalo grass rustled with the passage of her skirts. His eyes lighted, the man seemed to grow in stature--six feet of sun-blessed, primitive health. Now was the time--

"Mollie!"

There was a sudden gasp from the woman. With a hand to her throat, she wheeled swiftly round, confronting him.

"I'm back at last. Aren't you glad to see me?"

She was as pallid as an Easter-lily; pallid, despite the fact that she had decided, and had nerved herself for his coming.

Steve was puzzled. "Mollie, girl"--he did not advance, merely stood as he was--"aren't you glad to see me? Won't you--come?"

There was a long space of silence; the woman did not stir. Then a strange, inarticulate cry was smothered in her throat. Swiftly, all but desperately, she stumbled blindly forward, although her eyes were shining with the enchantment of his presence; close to him she came, flung her arms around his broad chest, and strained him to her with the abandon of a wild creature.

"Steve!" tensely, "how could you? Glad? You know I'm glad--oh, so glad! You startled me, that was all."

"Mollie, girlie"--he lifted her at arms' length, joying in this testimony of his renewed strength and manhood--"I rode all last night to get here--to see you. Are you happy, girlie, happy?"

"Yes, Steve"--her voice was chastened to a murmur--"I--I'm very happy."

"That completes my happiness." Drawing her tenderly to him, he kissed her again and again--hungrily, passionately; then, abruptly, he fell to scrutinizing her, with a meaning that she was quick to interpret.

"Isn't there something you've forgotten, Mollie?"

"No, I've not forgotten, Steve." She drew the bearded face down to her own. Had Steve been observant he would have noticed that the lips so near his own were trembling; but he was not observant, this Steve Babcock. Once, twice and again she kissed him.

"I think I'll never forget, Steve, man--never!" With one hand she indicated the prairie that billowed away to the skyline. "This is our home, and I love it because it is ours. I shall always have you--I know now, Steve. And I'm the happiest, most contented woman in all the wide world."

She drew away with a sudden movement, her face aglow with love and happiness. She was pulling at his arm with all her might.

"Where are you going?" he asked, surprised.

"Over to the camp--to Journey's End. I must tell Annie Warren just as soon as ever I can find her."

A PRAIRIE IDYL

A beautiful moonlight night early in September, the kind of night one remembers for years, when the air is not too cold to be pleasant, and yet has a suggestion of the frost that is to come. A kind of air that makes one think thoughts which cannot be put into words, that calls up sensations one cannot describe; an air which breeds restless energy; an air through which Mother Nature seems to speak, saying--"Hasten, children; life is short and you have much to do."

It was nearing ten o'clock, and a full moon lit up the rolling prairie country of South Dakota for miles, when the first team of a little train of six moved slowly out of the dark shadow blots thrown by the trees at the edge of the Big Sioux, advancing along a dim trail towards the main road. From the first wagon sounded the suggestive rattle of tin cooking-utensils, and the clatter of covers on an old cook stove. Next behind was a load piled high with a compound heap of tents, tennis nets, old carpets, hammocks, and the manifold unclassified paraphernalia which twenty young people will collect for a three weeks' outing.

These wagons told their own story. "Camp Eden," the fanciful name given to the quiet, shady spot where the low chain of hills met the river; the spot where the very waters seemed to lose themselves in their own cool depths, and depart sighing through the shallows beyond,--Camp Eden was deserted, and a score of very tired campers were reluctantly returning to home and

work.

Last in the line and steadily losing ground, came a single trap carrying two people. One of them, a young man with the face of a dreamer, was speaking. The spell of the night was upon him.

"So this is the last of our good time--and now for work." He stopped the horse and stood up in the wagon. "Good-bye, little Camp Eden. Though I won't be here, yet whenever I see the moon a-shining so--and the air feeling frosty and warm and restless--and the corn stalks whitening, and the young prairie chickens calling--you'll come back to me, and I'll think of you--and of the Big Sioux--and of--" His eyes dropped to a smooth brown head, every coil of the walnut hair glistening.

It made him think of the many boat rides they two had taken together in the past two weeks, when he had watched the moonlight shimmering on rippling, running water, and compared the play of light upon it and upon that same brown head--and had forgotten all else in the comparison. He forgot all else now. He sat down, and the horse started. The noisy wagons ahead had passed out of hearing. The pair were alone.

He was silent a moment, looking sideways at the girl. The moonlight fell full upon her face, drawing clear the line of cheek and chin; bringing out the curve of the drooping mouth and the shadow from the long lashes. She seemed to the sensitive lad more than human. He had loved her for years, with the pure silent love known only to such a nature as his--and never had he loved her so wildly as now.

He was the sport of a multitude of passions; love and ambition were the strongest, and they were fighting a death struggle with each other. How could he leave her for years--perhaps never see her again--and yet how could he ask her to be the wife of such as he was now--a mere laborer? And again, his college course, his cherished ambition for years--how could he give it up; and yet he felt--he knew she loved him, and trusted him.

He had been looking squarely at her. She turned, and their eyes met. Each knew the thought of the other, and each turned away. He hesitated no longer; he would tell her all, and she should judge. His voice trembled a little as he said: "I want to tell you a story, and ask you a question--may I?"

She looked at him quickly, then answered with a smile: "I'm always glad to hear stories--and at the worst one can always decline to answer questions."

He looked out over the prairie, and saw the lights of the little town--her home--in the distance.

"It isn't a short story, and I have only so long"--he pointed along the road ahead to the village beyond--"to tell it in." He settled back in the seat, and began speaking. His voice was low and soft, like the prairie night-wind.

"Part of the story you know; part of it I think you have guessed; a little of it will be new. For the sake of that little, I will tell all."

"Thirteen years ago, what is now a little prairie town--then a very little town indeed--gained a new citizen--a boy of nine. A party of farmers found him one day, sleeping in a pile of hay, in the market corner. He lay so they could see how his face was bruised--and how, though asleep, he tossed in pain. He awoke, and, getting up, walked with a limp. Where he came from no one knew, and he would not tell; but his appearance told its own story. He had run away from somewhere. What had happened they could easily imagine.

"It was harvest-time and boys, even though minus a pedigree, were in demand; so he was promptly put on a farm. Though only a child, he had no one to care for him--and he was made to work ceaselessly.

"Years passed and brought a marked change in the boy. How he lived was a marvel. It was a country of large families, and no one cared to adopt him. Summers, he would work for his board and clothes, and in winter, by the irony of Nature, for his board only; yet, perhaps because it was the warmest place he knew, he managed to attend district school.

"When a lad of fifteen he began to receive wages--and life's horizon seemed to change. He dressed neatly, and in winter came to school in the little prairie town. He was put in the lower grades with boys of ten, and even here his blunders made him a laughing-stock; but not for long, for he worked--worked always--and next year was put in the high school.

"There he established a precedent--doing four years' work in two--and graduated at eighteen. How he did it no one but he himself knew--studying Sundays, holidays, and evenings, when he was so tired that he had to walk the floor to keep awake--but he did it."

The speaker stopped a moment to look at his companion. "Is this a bore? Somehow I can't help talking to-night."

"No, please go on," said the girl quickly.

"Well, the boy graduated--but not alone. For two years he had worked side by side with a brown-haired, brown-eyed girl. From the time he had first seen her she was his ideal--his divinity. And she had never spoken with him five minutes in her life. After graduation, the girl went away to a big university. Her parents were wealthy, and her every wish was gratified."

Again the speaker hesitated. When he went on his face was hard, his voice bitter.

"And the boy--he was poor and he went back to the farm. He was the best hand in the country; for the work he received good wages. If he had worked hard before, he worked now like a

demon. He thought of the girl away at college, and tried at first to crowd her from his memory--but in vain. Then he worked in self-defence--and to forget.

"He saw years slipping by--and himself still a farmhand. The thought maddened him, because he knew he was worthy of something better.

"Gradually, his whole life centred upon one object--to save money for college. Other boys called him close and cold; but he did not care. He seldom went anywhere, so intent was he upon his one object. On hot summer nights, tired and drowsy he would read until Nature rebelled, and he would fall asleep to dream of a girl--a girl with brown eyes that made one forget--everything. In winter, he had more time--and the little lamp in his room became a sort of landmark: it burned for hours after every other light in the valley had ceased shining.

"Four years passed, and at last the boy had won. In a month he would pass from the prairie to university life. He had no home, few friends--who spoke; those who did not were safely packed at the bottom of his trunk. His going from the little town would excite no more comment than had his coming. He was all ready, and for the first time in his life set apart a month--the last--as a vacation. He felt positively gay. He had fought a hard fight--and had won. He saw the dawning of a great light--saw the future as a battle-ground where he would fight; not as he was then, but fully equipped for the struggle.... But no matter what air-castles he built; they were such as young men will build to the end of time."

The speaker's voice lowered--stopped. He looked straight out over the prairie, his eyes glistening.

"If so far the boy's life had been an inferno, he was to be repaid. The girl--she of the brown eyes--was home once more, and they met again as members of a camping party." He half-turned in his seat to look at her, but she sat with face averted, so quiet, so motionless, that he wondered if she heard.

"Are you listening?" he asked.

"Listening!" Her voice carried conviction, so the lad continued.

"For a fortnight he lived a dream--and that dream was Paradise. He forgot the past, ignored the future, and lived solely for the moment--with the joy of Nature's own child. It was the pure love of the idealist and the dreamer--it was divine.

"Then came the reaction. One day he awoke--saw things as they were--saw again the satire of Fate. At the very time he left for college, she returned--a graduate. She was young, beautiful, accomplished. He was a mere farmhand, without money or education, homeless, obscure. The thought was maddening, and one day he suddenly disappeared from camp. He didn't say good-bye to any one; he felt he had no apology that he could offer. But he had to go, for he felt the necessity for work, longed for it, as a drunkard longs for liquor."

"Oh!" The exclamation came from the lips of the girl beside him. "I--we--all wondered why--."

"Well, that was why.

"He fell in with a threshing-crew, and asked to work for his board. They thought him queer, but accepted his offer. For two days he stayed with them, doing the work of two men. It seemed as if he couldn't do enough--he couldn't become tired. He wanted to think it all out, and he couldn't with the fever in his blood.

"At night he couldn't sleep--Nature was pitiless. He would walk the road for miles until morning.

"With the third day came relief. All at once he felt fearfully tired, and fell asleep where he stood. Several of the crew carried him to a darkened room, and there he slept as a dumb animal sleeps. When he awoke, he was himself again; his mind was clear and cool. He looked the future squarely in the face, now, and clearly, as if a finger pointed, he saw the path that was marked for him. He must go his way--and she must go hers. Perhaps, after four years or more--but the future was God's."

The boy paused. The lights of the town were nearing, now; but he still looked out over the moon-kissed prairie.

"The rest you know. The dreamer returned. The party scarcely knew him, for he seemed years older. There were but a few days more of camp life, and he spent most of the time with the girl. Like a malefactor out on bail, he was painting a picture for the future. He thought he had conquered himself--but he hadn't. It was the same old struggle. Was not love more than ambition or wealth? Had he not earned the right to speak? But something held him back. If justice to himself, was it justice to the girl? Conscience said 'No.' It was hard--no one knows how hard--but he said nothing."

Once more he turned to his companion, in his voice the tenderness of a life-long passion.

"This is the story: did the boy do right?" A life's work--greater than a life itself, hung on the answer to that question.

The girl understood it all. She had always known that she liked him; but now--now--As he had told his story, she had felt, first, pity, and then something else; something incomparably sweeter; something that made her heart beat wildly, that seemed almost to choke her with its ecstasy.

He loved her--had loved her all these years! He belonged to her--and his future lay in her

hands.

His future! The thought fell upon her new-found happiness with the suddenness of a blow. She could keep him, but had she the right to do so? She saw in him something that he did not suspect--and that something was genius. She knew he had the ability to make for himself a name that would stand among the great names of the earth.

Then, did his life really belong to her? Did it not rather belong to himself and to the world?

She experienced a struggle, fierce as he himself had fought. And the boy sat silent, tense, waiting for her answer.

Yes, she must give him up; she would be brave. She started to speak, but the words would not come. Suddenly she buried her face in her hands, while the glistening brown head trembled with her sobs.

It was the last drop to the cup overflowing. A second, and then, his arms were around her. The touch was electrifying--it was oblivion--it was heaven--it was--but only a young lover knows what.

"You have answered," said the boy. "God forgive me--but I can't go away now."

Thus Fate sported with two lives.

THE MADNESS OF WHISTLING WINGS

CHAPTER I--SANDFORD THE EXEMPLARY

Ordinarily Sandford is sane--undeniably so. Barring the seventh, upon any other day of the week, fifty-one weeks in the year, from nine o'clock in the morning until six at night--omitting again a scant half-hour at noon for lunch--he may be found in his tight little box of an office on the fifth floor of the Exchange Building, at the corner of Main Avenue and Thirteenth Street, where the elevated makes its loop.

No dog chained beside his kennel is more invariably present, no caged songster more incontestably anchored. If you need his services, you have but to seek his address between the hours mentioned. You may do so with the same assurance of finding him on duty that you would feel, if you left a jug of water out of doors over night in a blizzard, that the jug, as a jug, would be no longer of value in the morning. He was, and is, routine impersonate, exponent of sound business personified; a living sermon against sloth and improvidence, and easy derelictions of the flesh.

That is to say, he is such fifty-one weeks out of the fifty-two. All through the frigid winter season, despite the lure of California limiteds or Havana liners, he holds hard in that den of his, with its floor and walls of sanitary tiling and its ceiling of white enamel, and hews--or grinds rather, for Sandford is a dental surgeon--close to the line.

All through the heat of summer, doggedly superior to the call of Colorado or the Adirondacks or the Thousand Islands, he comes and departs by the tick of the clock. Base-ball fans find him adamant; turf devotees, marble; golf enthusiasts, cold as the tiles beneath his feet.

Even in early June, when Dalton, whose suburban home is next door, returns, tanned and clear-eyed from a week-end at *the* lake--there is but one lake to Dalton--and calls him mysteriously back to the rear of the house, where, with a flourish, the cover is removed from a box the expressman has just delivered, to disclose a shining five-pound bass reposing upon its bed of packed ice--even then, hands in pockets, Sandford merely surveys and expresses polite congratulation. Certainly it is a fine fish, a noble fish, even; but for the sake of one like it--or, yes, granted a dozen such--to leave the office, the sanitary-tiled office, deserted for four whole days (especially when Dr. Corliss on the floor below is watching like a hawk)--such a crazy proceeding is not to be thought of.

Certainly he will not go along the next week end--or the next, either. The suggestion simply is unthinkable. Such digressions may be all right for the leisure class or for invalids; but for adults, live ones, strong and playing the game? A shrug and a tolerant smile end the discussion, as, hands still in his pockets, an after-dinner cigar firm between his teeth, Sandford saunters back across the dozen feet of sod separating his own domicile from that of his fallen and misguided neighbor.

"Dalton's got the fever again, bad," he comments to the little woman upon his own domain, whom he calls "Polly," or "Mrs. Sandford," as occasion dictates. She has been watching the preceding incident with inscrutable eyes.

"Yes?" Polly acknowledges, with the air of harkening to a familiar harangue while casting ahead, in anticipation of what was to come next.

"Curious about Dalton; peculiar twist to his mental machinery somewhere." Sandford blows a cloud of smoke and eyes it meditatively. "Leaving business that way, chopping it all to pieces in

fact; and just for a fish! Curious!"

"Harry's got something back there that'll probably interest you," he calls out to me as I chug by in my last year's motor; "better stop and see."

"Yes," I acknowledge simply; and though Polly's eyes and mine meet we never smile, or twitch an eyelid, or turn a hair; for Sandford is observing--and this is only June.

So much for Dr. Jekyll Sandford, the Sandford of fifty-one weeks in the year.


Then, as inevitably as time rolls by, comes that final week; period of mania, of abandon; and in the mere sorcerous passage of a pair of whirring wings, Dr. Jekyll, the exemplary, is no more. In his place, wearing his shoes, audaciously signing his name even to checks, is that other being, Hyde: one absolutely the reverse of the reputable Jekyll; repudiating with scorn that gentleman's engagements; with brazen effrontery denying him utterly, and all the sane conventionality for which the name has become a synonyme.

Worst of all, rank blasphemy, he not only refuses to set foot in that modern sanitary office of enamel and tiling, at the corner of Thirteenth and Main, below which, by day and by night, the "L" trains go thundering, but deliberately holds it up to ridicule and derision and insult.

CHAPTER II--THE PRESAGE OF THE WINGS

And I, the observer--worse, the accessory--know, in advance, when the metamorphosis will transpire.

When, on my desk-pad calendar the month recorded is October, and the day begins with a twenty, there comes the first premonition of winter; not the reality, but a premonition; when, at noon the sun is burning hot, and, in the morning, frost glistens on the pavements; when the leaves are falling steadily in the parks, and not a bird save the ubiquitous sparrow is seen, I begin to suspect.

But when at last, of an afternoon, the wind switches with a great flurry from south to dead north, and on the flag-pole atop of the government building there goes up this signal: ; and when later, just before retiring, I surreptitiously slip out of doors, and, listening breathlessly, hear after a moment despite the clatter of the wind, high up in the darkness overhead that muffled *honk! honk! honk!* of the Canada-goose winging on its southern journey in advance of the coming storm--then I *know*.

So well do I know, that I do not retire--not just yet. Instead, on a pretext, any pretext, I knock out the ashes from my old pipe, fill it afresh, and wait. I wait patiently, because, inevitable as Fate, inevitable as that call from out the dark void of the sky, I know there will come a trill of the telephone on the desk at my elbow; my own Polly--whose name happens to be Mary--is watching as I take down the receiver to reply.

CHAPTER III--THE OTHER MAN

It is useless to dissimulate longer, then. I am discovered, and I know I am discovered. "Hello, Sandford," I greet without preface.

"Sandford!" (I am repeating in whispers what he says for my Polly's benefit.) "Sandford! How the deuce did you know?"

"Know?" With the Hyde-like change comes another, and I feel positively facetious. "Why I know your ring of course, the same as I know your handwriting on a telegram. What is it? I'm busy."

"I'm busy, too. Don't swell up." (Imagine "swell up" from Sandford, the repressed and decorous!) "I just wanted to tell you that the honkers are coming."

"No! You're imagining, or you dreamed it!... Anyway, what of it? I tell you I'm busy."

"Cut it out!" I'm almost scared myself, the voice is positively ferocious. "I heard them not five minutes ago, and besides, the storm signal is up. I'm getting my traps together now. Our train goes at three-ten in the morning, you know."

"Our-train-goes-at-three-ten--in-the-morning!"

"I said so."

"*Our* train?"

"Our train: the one which is to take us out to Rush Lake. Am I clear? I'll wire Johnson to meet us with the buckboard."

"Clear, yes; but go in the morning--Why, man, you're crazy! I have engagements for all day tomorrow."

"So have I."

"And the next day."

"Yes."

"And the next."

"A whole week with me. What of it?"

"What of it! Why, business--"

"Confound business! I tell you they're coming; I heard them. I haven't any more time to waste

talking, either. I've got to get ready. Meet you at three-ten, remember."

"But--"

"Number, please," requests Central, wearily.

CHAPTER IV--CAPITULATION

Thus it comes to pass that I go; as I know from the first I shall go, and Sandford knows that I will go; and, most of all, as Mary knows that I will go.

In fact, she is packing for me already; not saying a word, but simply packing; and I--I go outdoors again, sidling into a jog beside the bow-window, to diminish the din of the wind in my ears, listening open-mouthed until--

Yes, there it sounds again; faint, but distinct; mellow, sonorous, vibrant. *Honk! honk! honk!* and again *honk! honk! honk!* It wafts downward from some place, up above where the stars should be and are not; up above the artificial illumination of the city; up where there are freedom, and space infinite, and abandon absolute.

With an effort, I force myself back into the house. I take down and oil my old double-barrel, lovingly, and try the locks to see that all is in order. I lay out my wrinkled and battered duck suit handy for the morning, after carefully storing away in an inner pocket, where they will keep dry, the bundle of postcards Mary brings me--first exacting a promise to report on one each day, when I know I shall be five miles from the nearest postoffice, and that I shall bring them all back unused.

And, last of all, I slip to bed, and to dreams of gigantic honkers serene in the blue above; of whirring, whistling wings that cut the air like myriad knife blades; until I wake up with a start at the rattle of the telephone beside my bed, and I know that, though dark as a pit of pitch, it is morning, and that Sandford is already astir.

CHAPTER V--ANTICIPATION

In the smoking-car forward I find Sandford. He is a most disreputable-looking specimen. Garbed in weather-stained corduroys, and dried-grass sweater, and great calfskin boots, he sprawls among gun-cases and shell-carriers--no sportsman will entrust these essentials to the questionable ministrations of a baggage-man--and the air about him is blue from the big cigar he is puffing so ecstatically. He nods and proffers me its mate.

"Going to be a great day," he announces succinctly, and despite a rigorous censorship there is a suggestion of excitement in the voice. "The wind's dead north, and it's cloudy and damp. Rain, maybe, about daylight."

"Yes." I am lighting up stolidly, although my nerves are atingle.

"We're going to hit it right, just right. The flight's on. I heard them going over all night. The lake will be black with the big fellows, the Canada boys."

"Yes," I repeat; then conscience gives a last dig. "I ought not to do it, though. I didn't have time to break a single engagement"--I'm a dental surgeon, too, by the way, with likewise an office of tile and enamel--"or explain at all. And the muss there'll be at the shop when--"

"Forget it, you confounded old dollar-grubber!" A fresh torrent of smoke belches forth, so that I see Sandford's face but dimly through the haze. "If you mention teeth again, until we're back--merely mention them--I'll throttle you!"

The train is in motion now, and the arc-lights at the corners, enshrouded each by a zone of mist, are flitting by.

"Yes," he repeats, and again his voice has that minor strain of suppressed excitement, "we're hitting it just right. There'll be rain, or a flurry of snow, maybe, and the paddle feet will be down in the clouds."

CHAPTER VI--"MARK THE RIGHT, SANDFORD!"

And they are. Almost before we have stumbled off at the deserted station into the surrounding darkness, Johnson's familiar bass is heralding the fact.

"Millions of 'em, boys," he assures us, "billions! Couldn't sleep last night for the racket they made on the lake. Never saw anything like it in the twenty years I've lived on the bank. You sure have struck it this time. Right this way," he is staggering under the load of our paraphernalia; "rig's all ready and Molly's got the kettle on at home, waiting breakfast for you.... Just as fat as you were last year, ain't ye?" a time-proven joke, for I weigh one hundred and eight pounds. "Try to pull you out, though; try to." And his great laugh drowns the roar of the retreating train.

At another time, that five-mile drive in the denser darkness, just preceding dawn, would have been long perhaps, the springs of that antiquated buckboard inadequate, the chill of that damp October air piercing; but now--we notice nothing, feel nothing uncomfortable. My teeth chatter a bit now and then, when I am off guard, to be sure; but it is not from cold, and the vehicle might be a Pullman coach for aught I am conscious.

For we have reached the border of the marsh, now, and are skirting its edge, and--Yes, those are ducks, really; that black mass, packed into the cove at the lee of those clustering rushes, protected from the wind, the whole just distinguishable from the lighter shadow of the water:

ducks and brant; dots of white, like the first scattered snowflakes on a sooty city roof!

"Mark the right, Sandford," I whisper in oblivion. "Mark the right!"

And, breaking the spell, Johnson laughs.

CHAPTER VII--THE BACON WHAT AM!

When is bacon bacon, and eggs eggs? When is coffee coffee, and the despised pickerel, fresh from the cold water of the shaded lake, a glorious brown food, fit for the gods?

Answer, while Molly (whose real name is Aunt Martha) serves them to us, forty-five minutes later.

Oh, if we only had time to eat, as that breakfast deserves to be eaten! If we only had time!

But we haven't; no; Sandford says so, in a voice that leaves no room for argument. The sky is beginning to redden in the east; the surface of the water reflects the glow, like a mirror; and, seen through the tiny-paned windows, black specks, singly and in groups, appear and disappear, in shifting patterns, against the lightening background.

"No more now, Aunt Martha--no. Wait until noon; just wait--and *then* watch us! Ready, Ed?"

"Waiting for you, Sam." It's been a year since I called him by his Christian name; but I never notice, nor does he. "All ready."

"Better try the point this morning; don't you think, Johnson?"

"Yes, if you've your eye with ye. Won't wait while y' sprinkle salt on their tails, them red-heads and canvas boys. No, sir-ree."

CHAPTER VIII--FEATHERED BULLETS

The breath of us is whistling through our nostrils, like the muffled exhaust of a gasoline engine, and our hearts are thumping two-steps on our ribs from the exertion, when we reach the end of the rock-bestrewn point which, like a long index finger, is thrust out into the bosom of the lake. The wind, still dead north, and laden with tiny drops of moisture, like spray from a giant atomizer, buffets us steadily; but thereof we are sublimely unconscious.

For at last we are there, there; precisely where we were yesterday--no, a year ago--and the light is strong enough now, so that when our gun-barrels stand out against the sky, we can see the sights, and--

Down! Down, behind the nearest stunted willow tree; behind anything--quick!--for they're coming: a great dim wedge, with the apex toward us, coming swiftly on wings that propel two miles to the minute, when backed by a wind that makes a mile in one.

Coming--no; arrived. Fair overhead are the white of breasts, of plump bodies flashing through the mist, the swishing hiss of many wings cutting the air, the rhythmic *pat, pat*--"*Bang! Bang!*"

Was it Sandford's gun, or was it mine? Who knows? The reports were simultaneous.

And then--*splash!* and a second later,--*splash!* as two dots leave the hurtling wedge and, with folded wings, pitch at an angle, following their own momentum, against the dull brown surface of the rippling water.

Through the intervening branches and dead sunflower stalks, I look at Sandford--to find that Sandford is looking at me.

"Good work, old man!" I say, and notice that my voice is a little higher than normal.

"Good work, yourself,"--generously. "I missed clean, both barrels. Do better next time, though, perhaps.... *Down!* Mark north! Take the leader, you."

From out the mist, dead ahead, just skimming the surface of the water, and coming straight at us, like a mathematically arranged triangle of cannon balls, taking definite form and magnitude oh, so swiftly, unbelievably swift; coming--yes--directly overhead, as before, the pulsing, echoing din in our ears.

"*Ready!*"

Again the four reports that sounded as two; and they are past; no longer a regular formation, but scattered erratically by the alarm, individual vanishing and dissolving dots, speedily swallowed up by the gray of the mist.

But this time there was no echoing splash, as a hurtling body struck the water, nor tense spoken word of congratulation following--nothing. For ten seconds, which is long under the circumstances, not a word is spoken; only the metallic click of opened locks, as they spring home, breaks the steady purr of the wind; then:

"Safe from me when they come like that," admits Sandford, "unless I have a ten-foot pole, and they happen to run into it."

"And from me," I echo.

"Lord, how they come! They just simply materialize before your eyes, like an impression by flash-light; and then--vanish."

"Yes."

"Seems as though they'd take fire, like meteorites, from the friction."

"I'm looking for the smoke, myself--*Down!* Mark your left!"

Pat! pat! pat! Swifter than spoken words, swift as the strokes of an electric fan, the wings beat the air. *Swish-h-h!* long-drawn out, *crescendo*, yet *crescendo* as, razor-keen, irresistible, those same invisible wings cut it through and through; while, answering the primitive challenge, responding to the stimulus of the game, the hot tingle of excitement speeds up and down our spines. Nearer, nearer, mounting, perpendicular--

The third battalion of that seemingly inexhaustible army has come and gone; and, mechanically, we are thrusting fresh shells into the faintly smoking gun-barrels.

"Got mine that time, both of them." No repression, nor polite self-abnegation from Sandford this time; just plain, frank exultation and pride of achievement. "Led 'em a yard--two, maybe; but I got 'em clean. Did you see?"

"Yes, good work," I echo in the formula.

"Canvas-backs, every one; nothing but canvas-backs." Again the old marvel, the old palliation that makes the seemingly unequal game fair. "But, Lord, how they do go; how anything alive can go so--and be stopped!"

"Mark to windward! Straight ahead! *Down!*"

CHAPTER IX--OBLIVION

This, the morning. Then, almost before we mark the change, swift-passing time has moved on; the lowering mist has lifted; the occasional pattering rain-drops have ceased; the wind, in sympathy, is diminished. And of a sudden, arousing us to a consciousness of time and place, the sun peeps forth through a rift in the scattering clouds, and at a point a bit south of the zenith.

"Noon!" comments Sandford, intensely surprised. Somehow, we are always astonished that noon should follow so swiftly upon sunrise. "Well, who would have thought it!"

That instant I am conscious, for the first time, of a certain violent aching void making insistent demand.

"I wouldn't have done so before, but now that you mention it, I do think it emphatically." This is a pitiful effort at a jest, but it passes unpunished. "There comes Johnson to bring in the birds."

After dinner--and oh, what a dinner! for, having adequate time to do it justice, we drag it on and on, until even Aunt Martha is satisfied--we curl up in the sunshine, undimmed and gloriously warm; we light our briars, and, too lazily, nervelessly content to even talk, lay looking out over the blue water that melts and merges in the distance with the bluer sky above. After a bit, our pipes burn dead and our eyelids drop, and with a last memory of sunlight dancing on a myriad tiny wavelets, and a blessed peace and abandon soaking into our very souls we doze, then sleep, sleep as we never sleep in the city; as we had fancied a short day before never to sleep again; dreamlessly, childishly, as Mother Nature intended her children to sleep.

Then, from without the pale of utter oblivion, a familiar voice breaks slowly upon our consciousness: the voice of Johnson, the vigilant.

"Got your blind all built, boys, and the decoys is out--four dozen of them," he admonishes, sympathetically. "Days are getting short, now, so you'd better move lively, if you get your limit before dark."

CHAPTER X--UPON "WIPING THE EYE"

"To poets and epicures, perhaps, the lordly canvas-back--though brown from the oven, I challenge the supercilious *gourmet* to distinguish between his favorite, and a fat American coot. But for me the loud-voiced mallard, with his bottle-green head and audaciously curling tail; for he will decoy."

I am quoting Sandford. Be that as it may, we are there, amid frost-browned rushes that rustle softly in the wind: a patch of shallow open water, perhaps an acre in extent, to the leeward of us, where the decoys, heading all to windward, bob gently with the slight swell.

"Now this is something like sport," adds my companion, settling back comfortably in the slough-grass blind, built high to the north to cut out the wind, and low to the south to let in the sun. "On the point, there, this morning you scored on me, I admit it; but this is where I shine: real shooting; one, or a pair at most, at a time; no scratches; no excuses. Lead on, MacDuff, and if you miss, all's fair to the second gun."

"All right, Sam."

"No small birds, either, understand: no teal, or widgeon, or shovellers. This is a mallard hole. Nothing but mallards goes."

"All right, Sam."

"Now is your chance, then.... *Now!*"

He's right. Now is my chance, indeed.

Over the sea of rushes, straight toward us, is coming a pair, a single pair; and, yes, they are unmistakably mallards. It is feeding time, or resting time, and they are flying lazily, long necks

extended, searching here and there for the promised lands. Our guns indubitably cover it; and though I freeze still and motionless, my nerves stretch tight in anticipation, until they tingle all but painfully.

On the great birds come; on and still on, until in another second--

That instant they see the decoys, and, warned simultaneously by an ancestral suspicion, they swing outward in a great circle, without apparent effort on their part, to reconnoitre.

Though I do not stir, I hear the *pat! pat!* of their wings, as they pass by at the side, just out of gunshot. Then, *pat! pat!* back of me, then, *pat! pat!* on the other side, until once again I see them, from the tail of my eye, merge into view ahead.

All is well--very well--and, suspicions wholly allayed at last, they whirl for the second oncoming; just above the rushes, now; wings spread wide and motionless; sailing nearer, nearer--

"Now!" whispers Sandford, "*now!*"

Out of our nest suddenly peeps my gun barrel; and, simultaneously, the wings, a second before motionless, begin to beat the air in frantic retreat.

But it is too late.

Bang! What! not a feather drops?... *Bang!* Quack! Quack! *Bang! Bang!*... Splash!... Quack! Quack! Quack!

That is the story--all except for Sandford's derisive laugh.

"What'd I tell you?" he exults. "Wiped your eye for you that time, didn't I?"

"How in the world I missed--" It is all that I can say. "They looked as big as--as suspended tubs."

"Buck-fever," explains Sandford, laconically.

"That's all right." I feel my fighting-blood rising, and I swear with a mighty wordless oath that I'll be avenged for that laugh. "The day is young yet. If, before night, I don't wipe both your eyes, and wipe them good--"

"I know you will, old man." Sandford is smiling understandingly, and in a flash I return the smile with equal understanding. "And when you do, laugh at me, laugh long and loud."

CHAPTER XI--THE COLD GRAY DAWN

At a quarter of twelve o'clock a week later, I slip out of my office sheepishly, and, walking a half-block, take the elevator to the fifth floor of the Exchange Building, on the corner. The white enamel of Sandford's tiny box of an office glistens, as I enter the door, and the tiling looks fresh and clean, as though scrubbed an hour before.

"Doctor's back in the laboratory," smiles the white-uniformed attendant, as she grasps my identity.

On a tall stool, beside the laboratory lathe, sits Sandford, hard at work. He acknowledges my presence with a nod--and that is all.

"Noon, Sandford," I announce.

"Is it?" laconically.

"Thought I'd drop over to the club for lunch, and a little smoke afterward. Want to go along?"

"Can't." The whirr of the electric lathe never ceases. "Got to finish this bridge before one o'clock. Sorry, old man."

"Harry just 'phoned and asked me to come and bring you." I throw the bait with studied nicety. "He's getting up a party to go out to Johnson's, and wants to talk things over a bit in advance."

"Harry!" Irony fairly drips from the voice. "He's always going somewhere. Mustn't have much else to do. Anyway, can't possibly meet him this noon."

"To-night, then." I suggest tentatively. "He can wait until then, I'm sure."

"Got to work to-night, too. Things are all piled up on me." Sandford applies a fresh layer of pumice to the swiftly moving polishing wheel, with practised accuracy. "Tell Harry I'm sorry; but business is business, you know."

"*Purr-r-r!*" drones on the lathe, "*purr-r-r!*" I hear it as I silently slip away.

Yes, Sandford is sane; and will be for fifty-one weeks.

A new settlement in a new country: no contemporary mind can conceive the possibilities of future greatness that lie in the fulfilment of its prophecy.

A long, irregular quadrangle has been hewn from the woods bordering the north bank of the Ohio River. Scattered through the clearing are rude houses, built of the forest logs. Bounding the space upon three sides, and so close that its storm music sounds plain in every ear, is the forest itself. On the fourth side flows the wide river, covered now, firm and silent, with a thick ice blanket. Across the river on the Kentucky shore, softened by the blue haze of distance, another forest crowds down to the very water's edge.

It is night, and of the cabins in the clearing each reflects, in one way or another, the character of its builder. Here a broad pencil of light writes "Careless!" on the black sheet of the forest; there a mere thread escaping tells of patient carpentry.

At one end of the clearing, so near the forest that the top of a falling tree would have touched it, stood a cabin, individual in its complete darkness except for a dull ruddy glow at one end, where a window extended as high as the eaves. An open fire within gnawed at the half-green logs, sending smoke and steam up the cavernous chimney, and casting about the room an uncertain, fitful light--now bright, again shadowy.

It was a bare room that the flickering firelight revealed, bare alike as to its furnishings and the freshness of its peeled logs, the spaces between which had been "chinked" with clay from the river-bank. Scarcely a thing built of man was in sight which had not been designed to kill; scarcely a product of Nature which had not been gathered at cost of animal life. Guns of English make, stretched horizontally along the walls upon pegs driven into the logs; in the end opposite the wide fireplace, home-made cooking utensils dangled from the end of a rough table, itself a product of the same factory. In front of the fire, just beyond the blaze and the coals and ashes, were heaped the pelts of various animals; black bear and cinnamon rested side by side with the rough, shaggy fur of the buffalo, brought by Indians from the far western land of the Dakotas.

Upon the heap, dressed in the picturesque utility garb of buckskin, homespun, and "hickory" which stamped the pioneer of his day, a big man lay at full length: a large man even here, where the law of the fittest reigned supreme. A stubby growth of beard covered his face, giving it the heavy expression common to those accustomed to silent places, and dim forest trails.

Aside from his size, there was nothing striking or handsome about this backwoods giant, neither of face nor of form; yet, sleeping or waking, working or at leisure, he would be noticed--and remembered. In his every feature, every action, was the absolute unconsciousness of self, which cannot be mistaken; whether active or passive, there was about him an insinuation of reserve force, subtly felt, of a strong, determined character, impossible to sway or bend. He lay, now, motionless, staring with wide-open eyes into the fire and breathing slowly, deeply, like one in sleep.

There was a hammering upon the door; another, louder; then a rattling that made the walls vibrate.

"Come!" called the man, rousing and rolling away from the fire.

A heavy shoulder struck the door hard, and the screaming wooden hinges covered the sound of the entering footfall.

He who came was also of the type: homespun and buckskin, hair long and face unshaven. He straightened from a passage which was not low, then turning pushed the unwieldy door shut. It closed reluctantly, with a loud shrilling of its frost-bound hinges and frame. In a moment he dropped his hands and impatiently kicked the stubborn offender home, the suction drawing a puff of smoke from the fireplace into the room, and sending the ashes spinning in miniature whirlwinds upon the hearth.

The man on the floor contemplated the entry with indifference; but a new light entered his eyes as he recognized his visitor, though his face held like wood.

"Evenin', Clayton," he greeted, nodding toward a stool by the hearth. "Come over 'n sit down to the entertainment." A whimsical smile struggled through the heavy whiskers. "I've been seeing all sorts of things in there"--a thoughtful nod toward the fire. "Guess, though, a fellow generally does see what he's looking for in this world."

"See here, Bud," the visitor bluntly broke in, coming into the light and slurring a dialect of no nationality pure, "y' can't stop me thataway. There ain't no use talkin' about the weather, neither." A motion of impatience; then swifter, with a shade of menace:

"You know what I came over fer. It's actin' the fool, I know, we few families out here weeks away from ev'rybody, but this clearin' can't hold us both."

The menace suddenly left the voice, unconsciously giving place to a note of tenderness and of vague self-fear.

"I love that girl better 'n you er life er anything else, Bud; I tell ye this square to yer face. I can't stand it. I followed ye last night clean home from the party--an' I had a knife. I jest couldn't help it. Every time I know nex' time it'll happen. I don't ask ye to give her up, Bud, but to settle it with me now, fair an' open, 'fore I do something I can't help."

He strode swiftly to and fro across the room as he spoke, his skin-shod feet tapping muffled upon the bare floor, like the pads of an animal. The fur of his leggings, rubbing together as he

walked, generated static sparks which snapped audibly. He halted presently by the fireplace, and looked down at the man lying there.

"It's 'tween us, Bud," he said, passion quivering in his voice.

Minutes passed before Bud Ellis spoke, then he shifted his head, quickly, and for the first time squarely met Clayton's eyes.

"You say it's between you and me," he initiated slowly: "how do you propose to settle it?"

The other man hesitated, then his face grew red.

"Ye make it hard for me, Bud, 's though I was a boy talkin' to ye big here; but it's true, as I told ye: I ain't myself when I see ye settin' close to 'Liz'beth, er dancin' with your arm touchin' hern. I ain't no coward, Bud; an' I can't give her up--to you ner nobody else.

"I hate it. We've always been like brothers afore, an' it 'pears kinder dreamy 'n foolish 'n unnatural us settin' here talkin' 'bout it; but there ain't no other way I can see. I give ye yer choice, Bud: I'll fight ye fair any way y' want."

Ellis's attitude remained unchanged: one big hand supported his chin while he gazed silently into the fire. Clayton stood contemplating him a moment, then sat down.

By and by Ellis's head moved a little, a very little, and their eyes again met. A minute passed, and in those seconds the civilization of each man moved back generations.

The strain was beyond Clayton; he bounded to his feet with a motion that sent the stool spinning.

"God A'mighty! Are y' wood er are y' a coward? Y' seem to think I'm practisin' speech-makin'. D'ye know what it means fer me to come up here like this to you?" He waited, but there was no response.

"I tell ye fer the last time, I love that girl, an' if it warn't fer you--fer you, Bud Ellis--she'd marry me. Can ye understand that? Now will ye fight?--or won't ye?"

A movement, swift and easy, like a released spring, the unconscious trick of a born athlete, and Ellis was upon his feet. Involuntarily, Clayton squared himself, as if an attack were imminent.

"No, I won't fight you," said the big man, slowly. Without the least hesitation, he advanced and laid a hand upon the other man's shoulder, facing him at arm's length and speaking deliberately.

"It isn't that I'm afraid of you, either, Bert Clayton; you know it. You say you love her; I believe you. I love her, too. And Elizabeth--you have tried, and I have tried--and she told us both the same.

"God, man! I know how you feel. I've expected something like this a long time." He drew his hand across his eyes, and turned away. "I've had murder in my heart when I saw you, and hated myself. It's only in such places as this, where nothing happens to divert one's mind, that people get like you and me, Bert. We brood and brood, and it's love and insanity and a good deal of the animal mixed. Yes, you're right. It's between you and me, Bert,--but not to fight. One of us has got to leave--"

"It won't be me," Clayton quickly broke in. "I tell ye, I'd rather die, than leave."

For a full minute Ellis steadily returned the other man's fiery look, then went on as though there had been no interruption:

"--and the sooner we go the better. How do you want to settle it--shall we draw straws?"

"No, we'll not draw straws. Go ef you're afraid; but I won't stir a step. I came to warn ye, or to fight ye if y' wanted. Seein' y' won't--good-night."

Ellis stepped quickly in front of the door, and with the motion Clayton's hand went to his knife.

"Sit down, man," demanded Ellis, sternly. "We're not savages. Let's settle this matter in civilized fashion."

They confronted each other for a moment, the muscles of Clayton's face twitching an accompaniment to the nervous fingering of the buckhorn hilt; then he stepped up until they could have touched.

"What d' y' mean anyway?" he blazed. "Get out o' my road."

Ellis leaned against the door-bar without a word. The fire had burned down, and in the shadow his face had again the same expression of heaviness. The breathing of Clayton, swift and short, like one who struggles physically, painfully intensified the silence of that dimly lighted, log-bound room.

With his right hand Clayton drew his knife; he laid his left on the broad half-circle of wood that answered as a door handle.

"Open that door," he demanded huskily, "or by God, I'll stab ye!"

In the half-light the men faced each other, so near their breaths mingled. Twice Clayton tried to strike. The eyes of the other man held him powerless, and to save his life--even to satisfy a new, fierce hate--he could not stir. He stood a moment thus, then an animal-like frenzy, irresistible but impotent, seized him. He darted his head forward and spat in the heavy face so close to his own.

The unspeakable contempt of the insult shattered Bud Ellis's self-control. Prompted by blind fury, the great fist of the man shot out, hammer-like, and Clayton crumpled at his feet. It was a blow that would have felled the proverbial ox; it was the counterpart of many other blows, plus berserker rage, that had split pine boards for sheer joy in the ability to do so. These thoughts came sluggishly to the inflamed brain, and Ellis all at once dropped to his knees beside the limp, prostrate figure.

He bent over Clayton, he who had once been his friend. He was scarcely apprehensive at first, and he called his name brusquely; then, as grim conviction grew, his appeals became frantic.

At last Ellis shrank away from the Thing upon the floor. He stared until his eyeballs burnt like fire. It would never, while time lasted, move again.

Horror unutterable fell upon him.

II

In the year 1807 there were confined in a common Western jail, amid a swarm of wretches of every degree of baseness, two men as unlike as storm and sunshine. One was charged with treason, the other with murder; conviction, in either case, meant death.

One was a man of middle age, an aristocrat born; a college graduate and a son of a college graduate; a man handsome of appearance, passionate and ambitious, who knew men's natures as he knew their names. He had fought bravely for his country, and his counsels had helped mould the foundations of the new republic. Honored by his fellow-men, he had served brilliantly in such exalted positions as that of United States Senator, and Attorney General for the State of New York. On one occasion, only a single vote stood between him and the presidency.

His name was Aaron Burr.

The other was a big backwoodsman of twenty, whose life had been as obscure as that of a domestic animal. He was rough of manner and slow of speech, and just now, owing to a combination of physical confinement and mental torture altogether unlovely in disposition.

This man was Bud Ellis.

The other prisoners--a motley lot of frontier reprobates--ate together, slept together, and quarrelled together. Looking constantly for trouble, and thrown into actual contact with an object as convenient as Aaron Burr, it was inevitable that he should be made the butt of their coarse gibes and foul witticisms; and when these could not penetrate his calm, superior self-possession, it was just as inevitable that taunts should extend even to worse indignities.

Burr was not the man to be stirred against his calm judgment; but one day his passionate nature broke loose, and he and the offender came to blows.

There were a dozen prisoners in the single ill-lighted, log-bound room, and almost to a man they attacked him. The fight would not have lasted long had not the inequality appealed to Ellis on the second.

Moreover, with him, the incident was to the moment opportune. If ever a man was in the mood for war, it was the big, square-jawed pioneer. He was reckless and desperate for the first time in his life, and he joined with Burr against the room, with the abandon of a madman.

For minutes they fought. Elbows and knees, fists and feet, teeth and tough-skulled heads; every hard spot and every sharp angle bored and jabbed at the crushing mass which swiftly closed them in. They struggled like cats against numbers, and held the wall until the sound of battle brought the negligent guard running, and the muzzle of a carbine peeped through the grating. Burr and Ellis came out with scarce a rag and with many bruises, but with the new-born lust of battle hot within them. Ellis glowered at the enemy, and having of the two the more breath, fired the parting shot.

"How I'd like to take you fellows out, one at a time," he said.

From that day the two men were kept apart from the others, and the friendship grew. When Burr chose, neither man nor woman could resist him. He chose now and Ellis, by habit and by nature silent, told of his life and of his thoughts. It was a new tale to Burr, these dream products of a strong man, and of solitude; and so, listening, he forgot his own trouble. The hard look that had formed over his face in the three years past vanished, leaving him again the natural, fascinating man who had first taken the drawing-room of the rare old Jumel mansion by storm. It was genuine, this tale that Ellis told; it was strong, with the savor of Mother Nature and of wild things, and fascinating with the beauty of unconscious telling.

"And the girl?" asked Burr after Ellis finished a passionate account of the last year. Unintentionally, he touched flame to tinder.

"Don't ask me about her. I'm not fit. She was coming to see me, but I wouldn't let her. She's good and innocent; she never imagined we were not as strong as she, and it's killing her. There's no question what will happen to me; everything is against me, and I'll be convicted.

"No one understands--she can't herself; but she feels responsible for one of us, already, and will feel the same for me when it's over. Anyway, I'd never see her again. I feel different toward her now, and always would. I'd never live over again days like I have in the past year: days I hated a friend I'd known all my life--because we both loved the same woman. If the Almighty sent love of woman into the world to be bought at the price I paid, it's wrong, and He's made a mistake. It's contrary to Nature, because Nature is kind.

"Last summer I'd sit out of doors at night and watch the stars come out thick, like old friends, till I'd catch the mood and be content. The wind would blow up from the south, softly, like some one fanning me, and the frogs and crickets would sing even and sleepy, and I'd think of her and be as nearly happy as it was possible for me to be.

"Then, somehow, he'd drift into the picture, and it grated. I'd wonder why this love of woman, which ought to make one feel the best of everything there is in life; which ought to make one kinder and tenderer to every one, should make me hate him, my best friend. The night would be spoiled, and from then on the crickets would sing out of tune. I'd go to bed, where, instead of sleeping, I would try to find out, and couldn't.

"And at last, that night--and the end! Oh, it's horrible, horrible! I wish to God they'd try me quick, and end it. It makes me hate that girl to think she's the cause. And that makes me hate myself, for I know she's innocent. Oh, it's tangled--tangled--"

Of the trial which followed, the world knows. How Burr pleaded his own case, and of the brilliancy of the pleading, history makes record at length. 'T was said long before, when the name of Burr was proud on the Nation's tongue--years before that fatal morning on Weekawken Heights--that no judge could decide against him. Though reviled by half the nation, it would seem it were yet true.

Another trial followed; but of this history is silent, though Aaron Burr pleaded this case as well. It was a trial for manslaughter, and every circumstance, even the prisoner's word, declared guilt. To show that a person may be guilty in act, and at the same time, in reality, innocent, calls for a master mind--the mind of a Burr. To tell of passion, one must have felt passion, and of such Burr had known his full share. No lawyer for the defence was ever better prepared than Burr, and he did his best. In court he told the jury a tale of motive, of circumstance, and of primitive love, such as had never been heard in that county before; such that the twelve men, without leaving their seats, brought a verdict of "Not guilty."

"I can't thank you right," said the big man, with a catch in his voice, wringing Burr's hand.

"Don't try," interrupted Burr, quickly. "You did as much for me." And even Burr did not attempt to say any more just then.

III

The two men went East together, travelling days where now hours would suffice. Why Burr took the countryman home with him, knowing, as he did, the incongruity of such a step, he himself could not have told. It puzzled Ellis still more. He had intended going far away to some indefinite place; but this opportunity of being virtually thrust into the position where he most wished to be, was unusual; it was a reversal of all precedent; and so why demur?



The two men went East together.

On the way, Burr told much of his life--probably more than he had told before in years. He knew that the sympathy of Ellis was sincere, and a disinterested motive was with him a new thing, a key to confidence.

A woman was at this time, and had been for years, foremost in Burr's mind. He was going to see her now; beyond that his plans were dim. During a career of politics, there had crept into the man's life much that was hard and worldly; but this attachment was from ambition far apart--his most sacred thing.

She was a brilliant woman, this friend of Burr's; one whom many sought; but it was not this which influenced him. She had been his best friend, and had taken him into her own home during the darkest hour of his life, when condemnation was everywhere. Gossip had fluttered, but to no avail. Burr never forgot a friend, and in this case it was more than friendship: it was a genuine love that lasted; for years later, in his old age and hers as well, old Jumel mansion made gay at their wedding.

"What do you expect to do?" asked Burr of Ellis.

"Anything just now that will make me forget," answered the countryman, quickly. "So there's enough of it is all that I ask. I'm going to get a little more education first. Sometime I'll study law--that is, if I'm here 'sometime.' I've got to be where there's life and action. I'll never end by being common." He paused a moment, and on his face there formed the peculiar heavy look that had confronted Clayton; a mask that hid a determination, which nothing of earth could shake. He finished slowly: "I'll either be something, or nothing."

Biographers leave the impression that at this time Burr was devoid of prestige on earth. Politically, this is true; but respecting his standing with the legal fraternity, it is wholly false. He had influence, and he used it, securing the stranger a place in a New York office, where his risk depended only upon himself. More than this, he gave Ellis money.

"You can pay me any interest you wish," said he when the latter protested.

Ellis had been settled a week. One evening he sat in the back room of the city office, fighting the demon of homesickness with work, and the light of an open fire. It was late, and he had studied till Nature rebelled; now he sat in his own peculiar position, gazing into the glow, motionless and wide-eyed.

He started at a tap on the door, and the past came back in a rush.

"Come in," he called.

Burr entered, and closed the door carefully behind him. Ellis motioned to a chair.

"No, I won't sit down," said Burr. "I'm only going to stay a moment."

He came over to the blaze, looking down on the other man's head. Finally he laid a hand on Ellis's shoulder.

"Lonesome, eh?" he inquired.

The student nodded silent assent.

"So am I," said Burr, beginning to pace up and down the narrow room. "Do you know," he burst out at last, "this town is like hell to me. Every hand is against me. There's not one man here, beside you, whom I can trust. I can't stand it. I'm going to leave the country. Some day I'll come back; but now it's too much." There was the accumulated bitterness of months in his voice. "My God!" he interjected, "you'd think these people never did anything wrong in their lives." He stopped and laid his hand again on the other man's shoulder.

"But enough of this--I didn't come to make you more lonesome. I want you to meet my friends before I go. You'll go out with me to-morrow afternoon?"

There was silence for a moment.

"If you wish. You know what I am," said Ellis.

Burr's hand rested a moment longer.

"Good-night," he said simply.

Some eight or ten miles north of the beach, on the island of Manhattan, stood Jumel home; a fine, white house, surrounded by a splendid lawn and gardens. A generation had already passed since its erection, and the city was slowly creeping near. It was a stately specimen of Colonial domestic architecture, built on simple, restful lines, and distinguished by the noble columns of its Grecian front. Destined to be diminished, the grounds had already begun to shrink; but from its commanding position it had a view that was magnificent, overlooking as it did, the Hudson, the Harlem, the East River, the Sound, and upon every side, miles upon miles of undulating land.

On the way, and again upon the grounds, Burr related the history of the old landmark, telling much with the fascination of personal knowledge. The tale of the Morrises, of Washington and of Mary Philipse was yet upon his tongue, as he led Ellis through the broad pillared entrance, into the great hall.

Things moved swiftly, very swiftly and very dreamily, to the countryman in the next few hours. Nothing but the lack of ability prevented his vanishing at the sound of approaching skirts; nothing but physical timidity prevented his answering the greeting of the hostess; nothing but conscious awkwardness prompted the crude bow that answered the courtesy of the girl with the

small hands, and the dark eyes who accompanied her--the first courtesy from powdered maid of fashion that he had ever known. Her name, Mary Philipse, coming so soon after Burr's story, staggered him, and, open-mouthed, he stood looking at her. Remembrance came to Burr simultaneously, and he touched Ellis on the arm.

"Don't worry, my friend," he laughed; "she's not the one."

Ellis grew red to the ears.

"We'll leave you to Mary," said Burr retreating with a smile; "she'll tell you the rest--from where I left off."

The girl with the big brown eyes was still smiling in an amused sort of way, but Ellis showed no resentment. He knew that to her he was a strange animal--very new and very peculiar. He did not do as a lesser man would have done, pretend knowledge of things unknown, but looked the girl frankly in the eyes.

"Pardon me, but it was all rather sudden," he explained. The red had left his face now. "I've only known a few women--and they were not--of your class. This is Mr. Burr's joke, not mine."

The smile faded from the girl's face. She met him on his own ground, and they were friends.

"Don't take it that way," she protested, quickly. "I see, he's been telling you of Washington's Mary Philipse. It merely happens that my name is the same. I'm simply a friend visiting here. Can't I show you the house? It's rather interesting."

If Ellis was a novelty to the woman, she was equally so to him. Unconventionality reigned in that house, and they were together an hour. Never before in his life had Ellis learned so much, nor caught so many glimpses of things beyond, in an equal length of time. His idea of woman had been trite, a little vague. He had no ideal; he had simply accepted, without question, the one specimen he had known well.

In an uncertain sort of way he had thought of the sex as being invariably creatures of unquestioned virtue, but of mind somewhat defective; who were to be respected and protected, loved perhaps with the love animals know; but of such an one as this he had no conception.

Here was a woman, younger than he, whose unconscious familiarity with things, which to him lay hidden in the dark land of ignorance, affected him like a stimulant. A woman who had read and travelled and thought and felt; whose mind met him even in the unhesitating confidence of knowledge--it is no wonder that he was in a dream. It turned his little world upside down: so brief a time had elapsed since he had cursed woman for bringing crime into his life, in the narrowness of his ignorance thinking them all alike. He was in the presence of a superior, and his own smallness came over him like a flood.

He mentally swore, then and there, with a tightening of his jaw that meant finality, that he would raise himself to her plane. The girl saw the look, and wondered at it.

That night, at parting, the eyes of the two met. A moment passed--and another, and neither spoke a word. Then a smile broke over the face of Mary Philipse, and it was answered on the face of the man. Equals had met equals. At last the girl held out her hand.

"Call again, please," she requested. "Good-night."

Years passed. Burr had gone and returned again, and Jumel mansion had waxed festive to honor his home-coming. Then he opened an office in the city, and drab-colored routine fell upon him--to remain.

Meanwhile Time had done much for Ellis--rather, it had allowed him to do much for himself. He had passed through all the stages of transition--confusion, homesickness, despondency; but incentive to do was ever with him.

At first he had worked to forget, and, in self-defence; but Nature had been kind, and with years memory touched him softly, as though it were the past of another.

Then a new incentive came to him: an incentive more potent than the former, and which grew so slowly he did not recognize it, until he met it unmistakably face to face. Again into his life and against his will had crept a woman, and this woman's name was Mary Philipse. He met her now on her own ground, but still, as of old, with honors even. She had changed little since he first saw her. As often as he called, he met the same frank smile, and the brown eyes still regarded him with the same old candid, unreserved interest.

Ellis was, as the town would have said, successful. He had risen from a man-of-all-work to the State bar, and an office of his own. He had passed the decisive line and his rise was simply a question of time. He was in a position where he could do as he chose. He appreciated that Mary Philipse was the incentive that had put him where he was. She appealed to the best there was in his nature. She caused him to do better work, to think better thoughts. He unselfishly wished her the best there was of life. Just how much more he felt he did not know--at least this was sufficient.

He would ask her to marry him. It was not the mad, dazzling passion of which poets sing; but he was wiser than of yore. Of Mary he was uncertain. That he was not the only man who went often to old Jumel mansion he was well aware, and with the determination to learn certainties, there came a tenderer regard than he had yet known.

Jumel was gay that night. There would be few more such scenes, for the owner was no longer

young; but of this the throng in brocade and broadcloth and powder, who filled the spacious mansion, were thoughtless. Everywhere was an atmosphere of welcome; from the steady light of lanterns festooned on facade and lawn, to the sparkle of countless candles within.

It was that night that Ellis drew Mary Philipse aside and told her the tale that grew passionate in the telling. Fortune was kind, for he told it to the soft accompaniment of wine glasses ringing, and the slow music of the stately minuet.

Mary Philipse heard him through without a word, an expression on her face he had never seen before. Then their eyes met in the same frank way they had hundreds of times before, and she gave him her answer.

"I've expected this, and I've tried to be ready; but I'm not. I can't say no, and I can't say yes. I wouldn't try to explain to any one else, but I think you'll understand. Forgive me if I analyze you a little, and don't interrupt, please."

She passed her hand over her face slowly, a shade wearily.

"There are times when I come near loving you: for what you are, not for what you are to me. You are natural, you're strong; but you lack something I feel to be necessary to make life completely happy--the ability to forget all and enjoy the moment. I have watched you for years. It has been so in the past, and will be so in the future. Other men who see me, men born to the plane, have the quality--call it butterfly if you will--to enjoy the 'now.' It appeals to me--I am of their manner born." Their eyes met and she finished slowly, "It's injustice to you, I know; but I can't answer--now."

They sat a moment side by side in silence. The dancers were moving more swiftly to the sound of the Virginia reel.

Ellis reached over and took her hand, then bent and touched it softly with his lips.

"I will wait--and abide," he said.

THE CUP THAT O'ERFLOWED: AN OUTLINE

I

In a room, half-lighted by the red rays of a harvest moon, a woman lay in the shadow; face downward, on the bed. It was not the figure of youth: the full lines of waist and hip spoke maturity. She was sobbing aloud and bitterly, so that her whole body trembled.

The clock struck the hour, the half, again the hour; and yet she lay there, but quiet, with face turned toward the window and the big, red harvest moon. It was not a handsome face; besides, now it was tear-stained and hard with the reflection of a bitter battle fought.

A light foot tapped down the hallway and stopped in front of the door. There was gentle accompaniment on the panel to the query, "Are you asleep?"

The woman on the bed opened her eyes wider, without a word.

The step in the hall tapped away into silence. The firm, round arm in its black elbow-sleeve setting, white, beautiful, made a motion of impatience and of weariness; then slowly, so slowly that one could scarce mark its coming, the blank stupor that comes as Nature's panacea to those whom she has tortured to the limit, crept over the woman, and the big brown eyes closed. The moon passed over and the night-wind, murmuring lower and lower, became still. In the darkness and silence the woman sobbed as she slept.

In the lonely, uncertain time between night and morning she awoke; her face and the pillow were damp with the tears of sleep. She was numb from the drawing of tight clothing, and with a great mental pain and a confused sense of sadness, that weighed on her like a tangible thing. Her mind groped uncertainly for a moment; then, with a great rush, the past night and the things before it returned to her.

"Oh, God, Thy injustice to us women!" she moaned.

The words roused her; and, craving companionship, she rose and lit the gas.

Back and forth she crossed the room, avoiding the furniture as by instinct--one moment smiling, bitter; the next with face moving, uncontrollable, and eyes damp: all the moods, the passions of a woman's soul showing here where none other might see. Tired out, at last, she stopped and disrobed, swiftly, without a glance at her own reflection, and returned to bed.

Nature will not be forced. Sleep will not come again. She can only think, and thoughts are madness. She gets up and moves to her desk. Aimlessly at first, as a respite, she begins to write. Her thoughts take words as she writes, and a great determination, an impulse of the moment, comes to her. She takes up fresh paper and writes sheet after sheet, swiftly. Passion sways the hand that writes, and shines warmly from the big, brown eyes. The first light of morning stains the east as she collects the scattered sheets, and writes a name on the envelope, a name which

brings a tenderness to her eyes. Stealthily she tiptoes down the stairs and places the letter where the servant will see, and mail it in the early morning. A glad light, the light of relief, is in her face as she steals back slowly and creeps into bed.

"If it is wrong I couldn't help it," she whispers low. She turns her face to the pillow and covers it with a soft, white arm. One ear alone shows, a rosy spot against the white.

II

Nine o'clock at a down-town medical office. A man who walks rapidly, but quietly, enters and takes up the morning mail. A number of business letters he finds and a dainty envelope, with writing which he knows at sight. He steps to the light and looks at the postmark.

"Good-morning," says his partner, entering.

The man nods absently, and, tearing open the envelope, takes out this letter:

"MY FRIEND:--

"I don't know what you will think of me after this; anyway, I cannot help telling you what to-night lies heavy on my heart and mind. I've tried to keep still; God knows I've tried, and so hard; but Nature is Nature, and I am a woman. Oh, if you men only knew what that means, you'd forgive us much, and pity! You have so much in life and we so little, and you torture us so with that little, which to us is so great, our all; leading us on against our will, against our better judgment, until we love you, not realizing at first the madness of unrequited love. Oh, the cruelty of it, and but for a pastime.

"But I do not mean to charge you. You are not as other men; you are not wrong. Besides, why should I not say it? I love you. Yes, you; a man who knows not the meaning of the word; who meant to be but a friend, my best friend. Oh, you have been blind, blind all the years since first I knew you; since first you began telling me of yourself and of your hopes. You did not know what it meant to such as I to live in the ambition of another, to hope through another's hope, to exult in another's success. I am confessing, for the first time--and the last time. Know, man, all the time I loved you. Forgive me that I tell you. I cannot help it. I am a woman, and love in a woman's life is stronger than will, stronger than all else together.

"I ask nothing. I expect nothing. I could not keep quiet longer. It was killing me, and you never saw. I did not mean to tell you anything, till this moment--least of all, in this way. But it is done, and I'm glad--yes, happier than I have been for weeks. It is our woman's nature; a nature we do not ourselves understand.

"My friend, I cannot see you again. Things cannot go on as they were. It was torture--you know not what torture--and life is short. If you would be kind, avoid me. The town is wide, and we have each our work. Time will pass. Remember, you have done nothing wrong. If there be one at fault it is Nature, for only half doing her work. You are good and noble. Good-bye. I trust you, for, God bless you, I love you."

The letter dropped, and the man stood looking out with unseeing eyes, on the shifting street.

A patient came in and sat down, waiting.

He had read as in a dream. Now with a rush came thought,--the past, the present, mingled; and as by a great light he saw clearly the years of comradeship, thoughtless on his part, filled as his life had been with work and with thought of the future. It all came home to him now, and the coming was of brightness. The coldness melted from his face; the very squareness of the jaw seemed softer; the knowledge that is joy and that comes but once in a lifetime, swept over him, warm, and his heart beat swift. All things seemed beautiful.

Without a word he took up his hat, and walked rapidly toward the elevator. A smile was in the frank blue eyes, and to all whom he met, whether stranger or friend, he gave greeting.

The patient, waiting for his return, grew tired and left, and leaving, slammed the office door behind him.

UNJUDGED

The source of this manuscript lies in tragedy. My possession of it is purely adventitious. That I have had it long you may know, for it came to me at an inland prairie town, far removed from water or mountain, while for ten years or more my name, above the big-lettered dentist sign, has stood here on my office window in this city by the lake. I have waited, hoping some one would come as claimant; but my hair is turning white and I can wait no longer. As now I write of the past, the time of the manuscript's coming stands clear amid a host of hazy, half-forgotten things.

It was after regular hours, of the day I write, that a man came hurriedly into my office, complaining of a fiercely aching tooth. Against my advice he insisted on an immediate

extraction, and the use of an anæsthetic. I telephoned for a physician, and while awaiting his coming my patient placed in my keeping an expansible leather-covered book of a large pocket size.

"Should anything go wrong," he said, "there are instructions inside."

The request is common from those unused to an operation, and I accepted without other comment than to assure him he need fear no danger.

Upon arriving, the physician made the customary examination and proceeded to administer chloroform. The patient was visibly excited, but neither of us attached any importance to that under the circumstances. Almost before the effect of the anæsthetic was noticeable, however, there began a series of violent muscular spasms and contractions. The inhaler was removed and all restoratives known to the profession used, but without avail. He died in a few moments, and without regaining consciousness. The symptoms were suspicious, entirely foreign to any caused by the anæsthetic, and at the inquest the cause came to light. In the man's stomach was a large quantity of strychnine. That he knew something of medicine is certain, for the action of the alkaloid varies little, and he had the timing to a nicety.

The man was, I should judge, thirty years of age, smooth of face and slightly built. Nerve was in every line of face and body. He was faultlessly dressed and perfectly groomed. He wore no jewelry, not even a watch; but within the pocket of his vest was found a small jewel-case containing two beautiful white diamonds, each of more than a carat weight. One was unset, the other mounted in a lady's ring. There was money in plenty upon his person, but not an article that would give the slightest clue to his identity.

One peculiar thing about him I noticed, and could not account for: upon the palm of each hand was a row of irregular abrasions, but slightly healed, and which looked as though made by some dull instrument.

The book with which he entrusted me had begun as a journal, but with the passage of events it had outgrown its original plan. Being expansible, fresh sheets had been added as it grew, and at the back of the book, on one of these blanks, had been hastily scratched, in pencil, the message of which he spoke:

"You will find sufficient money in my pockets to cover all expenses. Do not take my trinkets, please! Associations make them dear to me. Any attempt to discover my friends will be useless."

Notwithstanding the last sentence the body was embalmed and the death advertised; but no response came, and after three days the body and the tokens he loved were quietly buried here in the city.

Meantime I had read the book, beginning from a sense of duty that grew into a passing interest, and ended by making me unaware of both time and place. I give you the journal as it stands, word for word and date for date. Would that I could show you the handwriting in the original as well. No printed page can tell the story of mood as can the lines of this journal. There were moments of passion when words slurred and overtook each other, as thought moved more rapidly than the characters which recorded; and again, periods of uncertainty when the hand tarried and busied itself with forming meaningless figures, while the conscious mind roamed far away.

March 17. Why do I begin a journal now, a thing I have never done before? Had another asked the question, I could have turned it off with a laugh, but with myself it will not do. I must answer it, and honestly. Know then, my ego who catechises, I have things to tell, feelings to describe that are new to me and which I cannot tell to another. The excuse sounds childish; but listen: I speak it softly: I love, and he who loves is ever as a child. I smile at myself for making the admission. I, a man whose hair is thinning and silvering, who has written of love all his life, and laughed at it. Oh, it's humorous, deliciously humorous. To think that I have become, in reality, the fool I pictured others in fancy!

April 2. Gods, she was beautiful to-night!--the way she came to meet me: the long skirt that hung so gracefully, and that fluffy, white, sleeveless thing that fitted her so perfectly and showed her white arms and the curves of her throat. I forgot to rise, and I fear I stared at her. I can yet see the smile that crept through the long lashes as she looked at me, and as I stumbled an apology she was smiling all the time. How I came away I swear I don't know. Instinct, I suppose; for now at last I have an incentive. I must work mightily, and earn a name--for her.

April 4. He says it is a strong plot and that he will help me. That means the book will succeed. I wonder how a man feels who can do things, not merely dream them. I expected he would laugh when I told him the plot, especially when I told whom the woman was; but he didn't say a word. He thinks, as I do, that it would be better to leave the story's connection with her a surprise until the book is published. He is coming up here to work to-morrow. "Keep a plot warm," he says: "especially one with a love in it." He looked at me out of the corner of his eye as he spoke, so peculiarly I hardly knew whether he was laughing at me or not. I suppose, just now, my state of mind is rather obvious and amusing.

May 3. As I expected, the reaction is on. What a price we have to pay for our happy moments in this world! I'm tired to-night and a little discouraged, for I worked hard all day, and did not accomplish much. "Lack of inspiration," he said. "The heroine is becoming a trifle dim. Hadn't you better go and enthuse a little to-night?"

I was not in a mood to be chaffed; I told him shortly: "No, you had better go yourself."

He smiled and thanked me. "With your permission," he said, "I will."

Nature certainly has been kind to him, for he is handsome and fascinating beyond any man I ever knew. I wanted to use him in the story, but he positively refused. He said that I would do better. So we finally compromised on a combination. "The man" has his hair and my eyes, his nose and my mouth. Over the chin we each smiled a little grimly, for it is stubborn--square, and fits us both. After all, it is not a bad *ensemble*. The character has his weak points, but, all in all, he is not bad to look upon.

June 10. We went driving this evening, she and I, far out into the country, going and coming slowly. The night was perfect, with a full moon and a soft south wind. Nature's music makers were all busy. On the high places, the crickets sang loudly their lonesome song to the night, while from the distant river and lowlands there came the uncertain minor of countless frogs in chorus.

For two hours I tasted happiness, divine happiness, happiness so complete that I forgot time.

I have known many beautiful women, women splendid as animals are splendid, but never before one whose intense womanliness made me forget that she was beautiful. I can't explain; it is too subtle and holy a thing. I sat by her side, so near that we touched, and worshipped as I never worshipped at church. If but for this night alone, my life is worth the living.

June 12. It seems peculiar that he should be working with me at this story; strange that he should care to know me at all. Perhaps I stand a little in awe of the successful man; I think we all do. At least, he is the example *par excellence*. I have seen him go into a room filled with total strangers, and though he never spoke a word, have heard the question all about,--"Who is he?" Years ago, when he as well as I was an unknown writer, we each submitted a story to the same editor, by the same mail. Both were returned. I can still see the expression on his face as he opened his envelope, and thrust the manuscript into his pocket. He did not say a word, but his manner of donning his top-coat and hat, and the crash of the front door behind him betrayed his disappointment. His work was afterwards published at his own risk. The ink on my story is fading, but I have it still.

July 2. She is going to the coast for the season, and I called to-night to say *au revoir*. I could see her only a few minutes as her carriage was already waiting; something, I believe, in honor of her last night in town. She was in evening dress, and beautiful--I cannot describe. Think of the most beautiful woman you have ever known, and then--but it is useless, for you have not known her.

I was intoxicated; happy as a boy; happy as a god. I filled the few moments I had, full to overflowing. I told her what every man tells some woman some time in his life. For once I felt the power of a master, and I spoke well.

She did not answer; I asked her not to. I could not tell her all, and I would have no reply before. Her face was turned from me as I spoke, but her ears turned pink and her breath came quickly. I looked at her and the magnitude of my presumption held me dumb; yet a warm happy glow was upon me, and the tapping of feet on the pavement below sounded as sweetest music.

As I watched her she turned, her eyes glistening and her throat all a-tremble. She held out her hand to say good-bye. I took it in mine; and at the touch my resolution and all other things of earth were forgotten, and I did that which I had come hoping to do. Gently, I slipped a ring with a single setting over her finger, then bending low, I touched the hand with my lips--whitest, softest, dearest hand in God's world. Then I heard her breath break in a sob, and felt upon my hair the falling of a tear.

August 5. I am homesick to-night and tired. It is ten-thirty, and, I have just gotten dinner. I forgot all about it before. The story is moving swiftly. It is nearly finished now, moreover it is good; I know it. I sent a big roll of manuscript to him to-day. He is at the coast, and polishes the rough draft as fast as I send it in. He tells me he has secured a publisher, and that the book will be out in a few months. I can hardly wait to finish, for then I, too, can leave town. I will not go before; I have work to do, and can do it better here. He tells me he has seen her several times. God! a man who writes novels and can mention her incidentally, as though speaking of a dinner-party!

August 30. I finished to-day and expressed him the last scrap of copy. I wanted to sing, I was so happy. Then I bethought me, it is her birthday. I went down town and picked out a stone that pleased me. Their messenger will deliver it, and she can choose her own setting. How I'd like to carry it myself, but I have a little more work to do before I go. Only two more days, and then--

I have been counting the time since she left: almost two months; it seems incredible when I think of it.

How I have worked! Next time I write, my journal confessor, I will have something to tell: I will have seen her--she who wears my ring.... Ah! here comes my man for orders. A few of my bachelor friends help me celebrate here to-night. I have not told them it is the last time.

September 5. Let me think; I am confused. This hotel is vile, abominable, but there is no other. That cursed odor of stale tobacco, and of cookery!

The landlord says they were here yesterday and went West. It's easy to trace them--everybody notices. A tall man, dark, with a firm jaw; the most beautiful woman they have ever seen--they all say the same. My God! and I'm hung up here, inactive a whole day! But I'll find them, they can't escape; and then they'll laugh at me, probably.

What can I do? I don't know. I can't think. I must find them first ... that cursed odor again!

Oh, what a child, a worse than fool I have been! To sit there in town pouring the best work of my life into his hands! I must have that book, I will have it. To think how I trusted her--waited until my hair began to turn--for this!

But I must stop. This is useless, it's madness.

September 9. It is a beautiful night. I have just come in from a long walk, how long I don't know. I went to the suburbs and through the parks, watching the young people sitting, two and two, in the shadow. I smiled at the sight, for in fancy I could hear what they were saying. Then I wandered over to the lakefront and stood a long time, with the waves lapping musically against the rocks below, and the moonlight glistening on a million reflectors. The great stretch of water in front, and the great city behind me sang low in concord, while the stars looked down smiling at the refrain. "Be calm, little mortal, be calm," they said; "calm, tiny mortal, calm," repeated endlessly, until the mood took hold of me, and in sympathy I smiled in return.

Was it yesterday? It seems a month since I found them. Was it I who was so hot and angry? I hold up my hand; it is as steady as my mother's when, years ago, as a boy, she laid it on my forehead with her good-night. The murmur of this big hotel speaks soothingly, like the voice of an old friend. The purr of the elevator is a voice I know. It all seems incredible. To-day is so commonplace and real, and yesterday so remote and fantastic.

He was lounging in the lobby, a hand in either pocket, when I touched him on the shoulder. He turned, but neither hands nor face failed him by a motion.

"I presume you would prefer to talk in private?" I said, "Will you come to my room?"

A smile formed slowly over his lips.

"I don't wish to deprive my--" He paused, and his eyes met mine, "--my wife of a pleasant chat with an old friend. I would suggest that you come with us to our suite."

I nodded. In silence we went up the elevator; in equal silence, he leading, we passed along the corridor over carpets that gave out no telltale sound.

She was standing by the window when we entered. Her profile stood out clear in the shaded room, and in spite of myself a great heart-throb passed over me. She did not move at first, but at last turning she saw him and me. Then I could see her tremble; she started quickly to leave, but he barred the way. The smile was still upon his face.

"Pardon me, my dear," he protested, "but certainly you recognize an old friend."

She grew white to the lips, and her eyes blazed. Her hands pressed together so tightly that the fingers became blue at the nails. She looked at him; such scorn I had never seen before. Before it, the smile slowly left his face.

"Were you the fraction of a man," she voiced slowly, icily, "you would have stopped short of--this."

She made a motion of her hand, so slight one could scarce see it, and without a word he stepped aside. She turned toward me and, instinctively, I bent in courtesy, my eyes on the floor and a great tumult in my heart. She hesitated at passing me; without looking up I knew it; then, slowly, moved away down the corridor.

I advanced inside, closing the door behind me and snapping the lock. Neither of us said a word; no word was needed. The fighting-blood of each was up, and on each the square jaw that marked us both was set hard. I stepped up within a yard of him and looked him square in the eye. I pray God I may never be so angry again.

"What explanation have you to offer?" I asked.

His eye never wavered, though the blood left his face and lip; even then I admired his nerve. When he spoke his voice was even and natural.

"Nothing," he sneered. "You have lost; that's all."

Quick as thought, I threw back the taunt.

"Lost the woman, yes, thank God; the book, never. I came for that, not for her. I demand that you turn over the copy."

Again the cool smile and the steady voice.

"You're a trifle late. I haven't a sheet; it is all gone."

"You lie!" I flung the hot words fair in his teeth.

A smile, mocking, maddening, formed upon his face.

"I told you before you had lost. The book is copyrighted"--a pause, while the smile broadened--"copyrighted in my name, and sold."

The instinct of battle, primitive, uncontrollable, came over me and the room turned dark. I fought it, until my hands grew greasy from the wounds where the nails bit my palms, then I lost control; of what follows all is confused.

I dimly see myself leaping at him like a wild animal; I feel the tightening of the big neck muscles as my fingers closed on his throat; I feel a soft breath of night air as we neared the open window; then in my hands a sudden lightness, and in my ears a cry of terror.

I awoke at a pounding on the door. It seemed hours later, though it must have been but seconds.

I arose--and was alone. The window was wide open; in the street below, a crowd was gathering on the run, while a policeman's shrill whistle rang out on the night. A hundred faces were turned toward me as I looked down and I dimly wondered thereat.

The knocking on the door became more insistent. I turned the lock, slowly, and a woman rushed into the room. Something about her seemed familiar to me. I passed my hand over my forehead--but it was useless. I bowed low and started to walk out, but she seized me by the arm, calling my name, pleadingly. Her soft brown hair was all loose and hanging, and her big eyes swimming; her whole body trembled so that she could scarcely speak.

The grip of the white hand on my arm tightened.

"Oh! You must not go," she cried; "you cannot."

I tried gently to shake her off, but she clung more closely than before.

"You must let me explain," she wailed. "I call God to witness, I was not to blame." She drew a case from the bosom of her dress.

"Here are those stones; I never wore them. I wanted to, God knows, but I couldn't. Take them, I beg of you." She thrust the case into my pocket. "He made me take them, you understand; made me do everything from the first. I loved him once, long ago, and since then I couldn't get away. I can't explain." She was pleading as I never heard woman plead before. "Forgive me--tell me you forgive me--speak to me." The grip on my arm loosened and her voice dropped.

"Oh! God, to have brought this on you when I loved you!"

The words sounded in my ears, but made no impression. It all seemed very, very strange. Why should she say such things to me? She must be mistaken--must take me for another.

I broke away from her grasp, and groped staggeringly toward the door. A weariness intense was upon me and I wanted to be home alone. As I moved away, I heard behind me a swift step as though she would follow, and my name called softly, then another movement, away.

Mechanically I turned at the sound, and saw her profile standing clear in the open window-frame. Realization came to me with a mighty rush, and with a cry that was a great sob I sprang toward her.

Suddenly the window became clear again, and through the blackness that formed about me I dimly heard a great wail of horror arise from the street below.

There was no other entry save the hasty scrawl in pencil.

THE TOUCH HUMAN

"Good-night." A lingering of finger tips that touched, as by accident; a bared head; the regular tap of shoes on cement, as a man walked down the path.

"Good-night--and God bless thee," he repeated softly, tenderly, under his breath, that none but he might hear: words of faith spoken reverently, and by one who believes not in the God known of the herd.

"Good-night--and God bless thee," whispered the woman slowly; and the south wind, murmuring northward, took the words and carried them gently away as sacred things.

The woman stood thinking, dreaming, her color mounting, her eyes dimming, as she read deep the mystery of her own heart.

They had sat side by side the entire evening, and had talked of life and of its hidden things; or else had remained silent in the unspoken converse that is even sweeter to those who understand each other.

She had said of a mutual friend: "He is a man I admire; he has an ideal."

"A thing but few of earth possess."

"No; I think you are wrong. I believe all people have ideals. They must; life would not be life without."

"You mean object rather than ideal. Does not an ideal mean something beautiful--something beyond--something we'd give our all for? Not our working hours alone, but our hours of pleasure and our times of thought. An ideal is an intangible thing--having much of the supernatural in its make-up; 'tis a fetish for which we'd sacrifice life--or the strongest passion of life,--love."

"Is this an ideal, though? Could anything be beautiful to us after we'd sacrificed much of life, and all of love in its attainment? Is not everything that is opposed to love also opposed to the ideal? Is not an ideal, when all is told, nothing but a great love--the great personal love of each individual?"

He turned to the woman, and there was that in his face which caused her eyes to drop, and her breath to come more quickly.

"I don't know. I'm miserable, and lonely, and tired. I've thought I had an ideal, and I followed it, working for it faithfully and for it alone. I've shown it to myself, glowing, splendid, when I became weary and ready to yield. I've sacrificed, in attempting its attainment, youth and pleasure--self, continually. Still, I'm afar off--and still the light beckons me on. I work day after day, and night after night, as ever; but the faith within me is growing weaker. Might not the ideal I worshipped after all be an earth-born thing, an ambition whose brightness is not of pure gold, but of tinsel? That which I have sought, speaks always to me so loudly that there may be no mistake in hearing.

"I am thy god,' it says; 'worship me--and me alone. Sacrifice--sacrifice--sacrifice--thyself--thy love. Thus shalt thou attain me.'

"One day I stopped my work to think; hid myself solitary that I might question. 'What shall I have when I attain thee?' I asked.

"Fame--fame--the plaudits of the people--a pedestal apart.'

"Yes,' whispered my soul to me, 'and a great envy always surrounding; a great fight always to hold thy small pedestal secure.'

"Of such as this are ideals made? No. 'Twas a mistake. I have sought not an ideal, but an ambition--a worthless thing. An ideal is something beautiful--a great love. 'Tis not yet too late to correct my fault; to seek this ideal--this beautiful thing--this love."

He reached over to the woman and their fingers, as by chance, touching, lingered together. His eyes shone, and when he spoke his voice trembled.

"You know the ideal--the beautiful thing--the love I seek."

Side by side they sat, each bosom throbbing; not with the wild passion of youth, but with the deeper, more spiritual love of middle-life. Overhead, the night wind murmured; all about, the crickets sang.

Turning, she met him face to face, frankly, earnestly.

"Let us think."

She rose, in her eyes the look men worship and, worshipping, find oblivion.

A moment they stood together.

"Good-night," she whispered.

"Good-night," his lips silently answered, pressing upon hers.

A DARK HORSE

Iowa City is not large, nor are the prospects for metropolitan greatness at all flattering. Even her most zealous citizen, the ancient of the market corner, admits that "there ain't been much stirrin' for quite a spell back," and among the broad fraternity of commercial travellers, the town is a standing joke. Yet, throughout the entire State, no community of equal size is so well known. It is the home of the State University.

In the year '90-something-or-other, there was enrolled in the junior class of the university, one Walter R. Chester, but it is doubtful whether five other students in the same classic seat of learning could have told you his given name. Away back in his freshman year he had been dubbed "Lord" Chester. And as "Lord" Chester alone is his name still preserved, and revered in university annals.

The reasons lying back of this exaltation to the peerage were not very complex, but quite as adequate as those usually inspiring college nicknames. He was known to be country-bred, and the average freshwater school defines the "country" as a region of dense mental darkness, commencing where the campus ends and extending thence in every direction, throughout the unchartered realms of space.

Each Friday afternoon, "Lord" Chester would carefully lock his room and disappear upon a bicycle; this much was plainly visible to everybody. On Monday he would reappear. The hiatus afforded a peg from which much unprofitable speculation was suspended. The argument most plausible was that he went home, while one romantic youth suggested a girl. The accusation was never repeated. What? The "Lord" a ladies' man? Tut! One would as soon expect a statue to drill a minstrel show.

Thus Chester's personal affairs remained a mystery. He never talked reflexively--rare attribute in a college man--and, moreover, curiosity never throve well in his presence. It utterly failed to bear fruit.

Another peculiarity distinguished him from all the rest of the student body: he roomed by

himself. Although invariably courteous and polite to visitors, he was never known to extend an invitation for a second visit. He quite obviously wanted to be left alone, and the "fellows" met him more than half-way.

But what, more than anything else, probably helped to designate him "Lord," was the scrupulous way in which he dressed. There was no hint of the pastoral in his sartorial accomplishments, and it was his one extravagance. Though from the country and therefore presumably poor, no swell son of the Western *haute monde* made an equally smart appearance.

We have been viewing the youth from the standpoint of his fellow-students. As a matter of fact, they never saw the real man, the man behind the closed door, at all. He was a terrific worker. When he decided to do a thing, he did it. Night was as day at such times, and meals were unthought of. He literally plunged out of sight into his work, and as yet he had never failed.

One reason for this uniform success lay in the fact that he was able to define his limitations, and never attempted the impossible. He was, indeed, poor; that is, relatively so. His earliest recollections were associated with corn rows and grilling suns; which accounted for the present cheerfulness with which he tackled any task, and for his appetite for hard work. When tired, he would think of the weight of a hoe in a boy's hand at six o'clock in the afternoon, and proceed with renewed vigor.

Such was "Lord" Chester: product of work and solitude; a man who knew more about the ideal than the real; a man who would never forget a friend nor forgive an injury; who would fight to the bitter end and die game--hero of "the" Marathon, whose exciting history is impossible to avoid in Iowa City.

By nature, Chester was an athlete, and by way of exercise he was accustomed to indulge in a few turns daily upon the cinder path. One evening in early spring he was jogging along at a steady brisk pace, when two men in training-suits caught up with him. They were puffing when they fell in beside him. Presently they dropped behind, and one, a tall important youth, of the name of Richards, called out:

"I say, me lud, aren't you going to clear the trail?"

Quick as a shot Chester halted and faced around.

"What's that?" he asked quietly.

The other two nearly bumped into him, but managed to come to a standstill, before precipitating that catastrophe. They lurched back upon their heels, nearly toppling backwards, too surprised for the moment to speak. Chester did not stir.

"Jiminy crickets!" Richards' companion exclaimed in a moment. "You're deuced sudden, Chester, I must say."

And Richards' manner promptly grew conciliatory.

"Old man," he said, smiling, "you really ought to train. You've got form--by George, you have! Besides, you wouldn't have any opposition to speak of, you know."

Richards was still smiling; but a smile, however warmly encouraged from within, is apt to take cold in a frost. The casual glance with which Chester took in the young man, from his light sprinting-pumps to his eyes, may be accurately described as frigid. Not until he had held the other's embarrassed look for an appreciable pause did he deign to speak.

"There really ought to be," he said without emotion, "at least one man in the field. I think I shall train."

Thus it came about that "Lord" Chester decided to enter athletics. Five minutes previously even the thought had not occurred to him; but he wasn't the man to quail before a bluff.

The track management of this particular university was an oligarchy; was governed by a few absolute individuals. Perhaps such a condition is not as rare as might be supposed. However that may be, it was here a case of being either "in" or "out." Chester was unpopular, and from the first had been out.

There were only four entries for the running events, the same names appearing in all; so he could not be kept from the field. But he well knew that various ways existed by which favoritism could be shown, and that these preferences, too trifling in themselves to warrant complaint, might prove a serious handicap in a close contest. He knew that, however honors might lie among the other entries, they would hesitate at nothing to prevent him from taking a place. In fact, Richards openly boasted that he would pocket "is ludship" at the finish.

So Chester shaped his plans accordingly. He had never aimed at the impossible, nor did he now. He withdrew from all short-distance runs and yard dashes, and concentrated his mind upon the Marathon--thus dignified, although the faculty would permit nothing more arduous than two miles.

In saying trained, everything is meant that the word can be made to imply: the sort of hour in, hour out, to-the-limit-of-endurance training which either makes or kills. A fortnight before Field Day Chester was in perfect condition, and had his capabilities gauged to a nicety. He was now entered only in the Marathon; they virtually had forced him from the half-mile, and they should be made to pay the penalty.

One day before the race Chester went to the bank and inquired the amount of his balance. It was shown him: one hundred and six dollars and some odd cents. He drew a cheque for the

amount, and thrust the bills into his pocket. From the bank he walked straight up Main Street for three blocks, then turned in at a well-kept brick house.

"Mr. Richards in?" he asked of the servant-girl.

"Yes, sir. Right upstairs--second door to the left. He's got company now."

The junior nevertheless resolutely mounted the stairs and knocked upon the door. The noise inside resembled a pocket-edition of the Chicago Board of Trade, so Chester hammered again, louder.

"Come!" some one yelled, and the noise subsided.

He opened the door and stepped inside. A half-dozen young fellows were scattered about, but as he knew none of them, except by name, he ignored their presence and walked directly up to Richards.

"I've come on business," he said; "can I speak with you a moment?"

"Sure!" Richards removed his feet from a chair, kicking it at the same time toward his visitor. "These fellows know more about my business now than I do myself, so get it off of your chest, Chester."

The company laughed, but Chester remained wholly unmoved.

"All right," said he, calmly. "You're in the Marathon: want to risk anything on it?"

Up went Richards' feet once more, this time to a table. He winked broadly at his friends, and replied with an air of vast carelessness,

"Why--yes; I don't mind. Guess I can cover you."

"How much?" demanded Chester. "Odds even, mind."

"I said I'd cover you, didn't I?" with some warmth. Richards fumbled in his trousers pockets, extracting therefrom a handful of loose change.

Chester advanced to the table. At sight of his roll of bills a sudden silence fell. All eyes were glued upon them while he counted.

"Five--ten--fifteen"--and so on, up to one hundred. He stowed the remaining five back in his pocket, pushed the pile into the middle of the table and looked coolly down at his host. Said he,

"One hundred, even, that I win the Marathon. Cover, or show these fellows the sort of piker you are."

And Richards came very near to showing them. His face was a study. He hadn't ten dollars to his name; he was painfully aware of the fact, and here were these six boys who would know it too in about two seconds. He was rattled, and sat looking at the pile of bills as though charmed. He racked his brain for some way out of the predicament, but the only thing he could think of was to wonder whether the portrait on the top note was that of Hendricks or Rufus Choate. "It can't be Choate," suddenly occurred to him. "But then it--"

There was a laugh in the back of the room. Richards stood up. A dozen fire alarms would not have recalled him so quickly. Whatever else might be said of the man he was game, and now his gameness showed.

"Give me an hour; I'll meet you then in front of the postoffice." While speaking he had gotten into his coat; now he walked toward the door. "Amuse yourselves while I'm gone, fellows," he said, and disappeared down the stairway.

Chester replaced the notes in his pocket, nodded gravely to the company and followed.

Not a boy spoke, but all sat staring blankly at the doorway.

An hour later, both Richards and Chester appeared at the postoffice. The former, by dint of much persistent circulation among his fellow athletes, had found enough of them who were willing to pool their funds in order to secure the necessary amount. The two young men had witnesses, the wager was properly closed and the money deposited. Neither spoke an unnecessary word during the meeting, but when Chester started to leave, Richards turned facetiously to his friends.

"'Is bloomin' ludship will start training Friday; bet he has his wheel in soak."

To which remark Chester paid not the slightest attention.

Whatever may be said to the contrary, six boys can no more retain a secret than can six girls, and inside of an hour the story of the big bet had spread over the town. In due course it penetrated to the city: one day a reporter appeared and interviewed the principals, and on the following Sunday their photographs adorned the pink section of a great daily. This was nuts for the university--but it is getting ahead of our own story somewhat.

Chester, naturally, was the centre of curiosity. He had not pawned his "bike," as was demonstrated when Friday rolled around; but had it been known that the last cent he owned in the world had been staked upon the issue, no doubt the interest would have been greater.

Field Day opened bright and clear, and early in the afternoon Athletic Park began to fill. A rumor had gone abroad that the two principal competitors had actually come to blows, and that each had sworn to die rather than lose the race. Long before the opening event the inclosure was crowded with spectators, all eagerly discussing the Marathon, to the exclusion of every

other contest. The opinion was freely expressed that Richards would "put a crimp in that chesty Chester," and that he would "win in a walk." They made no bones about playing favorites.

It was a still, hot day, and if there is any advantage in atmospheric conditions each contestant should have been inspired with that absolute confidence of winning, without which the fastest race is but a tame affair. At two o'clock the band commenced playing. The judges tried to follow the programme, but the cries of "Marathon! Marathon!" grew so insistent and clamorous that they finally yielded, and the event was called.

Richards responded first. He was popular, and the grandstand gave him an ovation as he took his position under the wire. It seemed as though the handkerchief of every girl present was in the air. The two figureheads, friends of Richards, came next, and last of all Chester.

A feeble attempt at applause marked his passage in front of the grandstand; but he never looked up, and for any indication he gave to the contrary, he might have been the only person on the grounds. His track suit was hidden by a long black door curtain, in lieu of a bath-robe, and a pretty girl on the front row remarked audibly, "He's all ready for the funeral."

"Sure thing," answered her companion. "He knows his obsequies are about to take place."

"Peels well," a man by the rail critically commented. "But--rats!--Richards has pocketed this event ever since he's been here; you can't make the pace for him with anything slower than an auto."

The runners were in line at last, crouching low, tense, finger-tips upon the ground, the starting-pistol above their heads.

"Starters ready?" floated in a sing-song voice from the judges' stand. "Timers r-r-read-y-y?" A sharp crack from the pistol, and they were off.

Then a queer thing happened. Instead of dawdling along behind, as every one expected, Chester, without an instant's hesitation, pushed to the front and set the pace.

And what a pace! It was literally a race from the word go. Chester took the inside and faced the music, Richards and the others close in behind. Sympathy in the grandstand was beginning to turn; everybody appreciates pluck. The spectators, however, knew him to be a novice, and many supposed that he had lost his head; so when he passed the grandstand on the first lap, any amount of contradictory advice was shouted noisily.

"Let them set the pace!" "You're killing yourself!" "Oh, you bally Lord!--go it, kid!" "Don't let 'em nose you out, Chester, old scout!" "Save your air, old top, you'll need it!" and much more of a like kind was hurled at him, which reached his ears through the veil of singing wind, like the roar of distant breakers upon the seashore.

He kept his own counsel. He had followed that pace every day during the last two weeks of his training, and he knew precisely what he could do. Besides the air was quiet, and the disadvantage of being pace-maker was not so great as people thought.

In this formation they came round the half-mile oval the second time, each man working with the nice regularity of well-oiled machinery. Not a sound now from the grandstand; only the soft *pat* of the runners' feet could be heard. The crowd had caught Chester's idea: but could he hold out?

They had passed the three-quarter pole on the third lap when a yell went up, and everybody rose excitedly to their feet. Space was growing rapidly between the leaders and those behind; it was now resolved to a duel between the principals.

As they dashed past, the crowd examined them closely, scores of field-glasses being trained upon them like so many guns.

Chester was still erect, his head well back, chest forward, arms working piston-like, close down at his sides, while his long, regular tread was as light and springy as an Indian's. His jaw was set grimly, but it was manifest that he was still breathing deep and regularly through his nostrils.

It was equally manifest that his opponent was in distress. The last of his strength and determination was dying away in a desperate effort to keep his pace; his face was colorless, eyes staring, his step irregular. Worst of all, his mouth was open, and his chest could be seen to vibrate as he panted.



He heard a voice ... and glanced back.

"By Jove!" muttered the man at the rail, as amazed as though the blue canopy of heaven had suddenly fallen, "Chester'll take it, I do believe!" And the crowd was beginning to believe the same.

The rivals maintained their relative positions until, on the last lap, the three-quarter pole was once more reached. The two figureheads had dropped out and mounted a fence where they would not be too far away from the finish.

Every eye was trained upon the racers, the excitement was tense. Chester was pounding grimly away; sweat was pouring down his face until it glistened in the sun; his legs ached as though in a boot of torture. But he had no thought of allowing Richards to close the gap between them by an inch. He was counting the *pat-pat-pat!* of his feet upon the track. "Seventy-three more, and it's won, old boy," he muttered. He could hear Richards' every breath. "One, two, three,--" he counted.

He heard a voice, so broken that the words could hardly be distinguished, and he glanced back.

"For God's--sake, Chester--hold--up!" gasped Richards. "I--can't lose--this race--now."

He was a pitiable figure, his white face drawn in lines of pain, his body swaying uncertainly, as he pressed despairingly on.

For one moment Chester's heart felt a throb of pity. Then he thought of his work in sun and rain; of Richards' contempt in the past; of the cheers for his rival and the open ridicule of his own pretensions; and last of all, but far from being the least consideration, the two hundred dollars absolutely necessary to carry him through his final year to graduation.

Ah, nobody knew about that two hundred dollars, save himself and one little girl, who had driven into town early in the afternoon, and who had slipped timidly into as good a seat as she could find in the stand. She showed one dot of pink among hundreds of fluffy white gowns; Chester was ignorant of her presence, but as he sped round and round the track, her eyes never once left him, nor did she cease praying silently that he might win!

Only for an instant did he hesitate; then his face settled into an expression not pleasant to look upon. He forgot that he was tired, that a grandstand full of howling maniacs was ahead of him. He thought only of the girl in pink--and made his spurt.

Richards tried to follow, but a haze was forming over his eyes. His heart was pounding until he believed that he must suffocate. Then he reeled suddenly, lost his balance and fell into darkness.

"So this is victory!" murmured Chester to himself a moment later, as he swayed unsteadily upon the shoulders of a howling mob. He was thinking of poor Richards lying back there upon the track. But just then he espied the transfigured face of the girl in pink.

"It is! It is!" he shouted joyfully.

THE WORTH OF THE PRICE

Nobody in a normal humor would dispute the fact that Clementine Willis was a strikingly handsome girl. One might even be moved, by a burst of enthusiasm, to declare her beautiful. There was about her that subtle, elusive charm of perfection in minute detail, possible only to the wealthy who can discriminate between art and that which is artificial, and who can take advantage of all of art's magic resources, without imparting the slightest suggestion of artificiality.

Her hair and eyes were dark--very dark; her skin bore the matchless, transparent tint of ivory; every line of her high-bred face, and of her hands and her slender, arched feet, bespoke the ultimate degree of refinement.

She was the sort of girl, in short, that a full-blooded man must needs stare at, perhaps furtively, but with no thought of boldness. Stupid, indeed, must be he who would attempt anything even remotely approaching familiarity with Miss Willis.

Her smart brougham waits in front of a new and resplendent down-town office building on a certain afternoon, while Miss Willis ascends in one of the elevators to the tenth floor. She proceeds with assurance, but leisurely--mayhap she is a trifle bored--to a door which somehow manages to convey an impression of prosperity beyond. It bears upon its frosted glass the name of Dr. Leonard, a renowned specialist in diseases of the throat, besides the names of a half-dozen assistants--in much smaller lettering--who, doubtless, are in the ferment of struggling for positions of equal renown.

The door opening discloses a neat, uniformed maid and a large and richly furnished reception-room. Five ladies, of various ages and all handsomely gowned, are seated here and there, manifestly forcing patience to relieve the *ennui* which would have been tolerated with no other detail of the day's routine.

This cursory survey is sufficient, it is hoped, to demonstrate that Dr. Leonard's practice is confined among a class of which most other practitioners might be pardonably envious.

The white-aproned, white-capped maid smiled a polite recognition of the newest arrival. A bit flustered by the calmly impersonal scrutiny with which her greeting was received, she addressed Miss Willis in a subdued voice.

"I was to tell you, Miss Willis, that there is no occasion for Dr. Leonard to see you himself to-day. If you please, Dr. Carter will fill your engagement."

Miss Willis did not please. It was quite clear that she regarded this arrangement with considerable disfavor.

"You may inform Dr. Leonard that I shall not wait," she said coldly. "If I am so far improved that I do not require his personal attention, I shall not come again."

With that, she turned decisively to leave. The maid followed her, hesitantly, to the door, and Miss Willis could not repress a smile at the girl's consternation. The situation had ended in an altogether unexpected manner. And then, in the next instant, it became manifest that, however absolute Dr. Leonard might be, it was not a part of the maid's duties to discourage those who would seek his services. She was emboldened to protest.

"Just try him, please, Miss Willis," in a nervous murmur; "he--truly--he's--"

The assurance was left unfinished; but the speaker's flurry revealed her predicament, and Miss Willis smiled encouragement.

"Very well," she returned graciously.

The maid gave her a grateful look and conducted her through several rooms, all in accord with the sumptuous reception-room, to a tiny private office, where she opened the door and stood respectfully on one side.

The visitor's submissive mood all at once vanished. She stared resentfully at the cramped quarters, and entered reluctantly, as if with a feeling of being thrust willy-nilly into a labelled pill-box. A man was writing at a desk in a corner, and he continued writing.

"Take a chair, please," he said crisply, without looking up. And this was the only sign to indicate that he was aware that his privacy had been invaded.

Miss Willis's dark eyes flashed. She seemed about to make an indignant rejoinder, but thought better of it. She ignored the invitation to sit down, however, and by and by the circumstance caught the writer's attention; he bent a quick, surprised look round at her--then proceeded with his writing. He did not repeat the request.

He presently finished his task, noted the time, and made an entry upon a tabulated sheet beside him; he then filed the memorandum upon a hook, and swung round in his chair, facing the intruder--for such the girl felt herself to be.

Fortunately Miss Willis was not without a sense of humor, and she was able to perceive an

amusing quality in her reception to-day. Such supreme indifference to her very existence was so wholly foreign to anything in her past experience, that she was acutely sensible of its freshness and novelty.

But now the man became all at once impressed with the circumstance that she was still standing, and he bounded guiltily to his feet.

"Pardon me!" he exclaimed in confusion. "I was--was very busy when you came in. Won't you please have this chair?" He awkwardly shoved one forward.

The man was young; Miss Willis was unable to determine whether he was good-looking, or ugly; whether he was the right sort, or impossible; so she accepted the proffered chair.

He resumed his own seat, and leaned one arm wearily upon the desk. Already he had forgotten his momentary embarrassment, and he was now regarding the girl simply as a patient.

"Dr. Leonard has given me the history of your case," he informed her in a matter of fact way. "He requests that I continue with it--unless, of course, you prefer that he treat you himself." He got up as he spoke, and Miss Willis decided that he was good-looking and young, and that he was tall and of a figure to appeal to the feminine eye.

Then she was guilty of a most reprehensible act of slyness. She turned full upon him the batteries of her lustrous dark eyes, and smiled dazzlingly, bewitchingly.

"I came to see Dr. Leonard," she said in a tone that made one think of dripping honey. "And I object to being turned over to an assistant--at least before consulting me."

Utterly at variance with all precedent, the bewitching look produced no effect whatever. The man bowed gravely, pressed a bell-button, and then went over to where Miss Willis was sitting. Before he could speak--if he had any such intention--a girl in starched cap and apron appeared in answer to his ring.

"Miss Willis has concluded not to remain," he informed the maid. "Show Number Twenty-seven into Room Four. Inform her that I will see her in two minutes." Producing his watch, he deliberately marked the time.

He turned to Miss Willis in a moment, with an air which said as plainly as words could have said it: "It's a terrible waste of precious time, but if necessary I'll sacrifice the two minutes to humoring any further caprices you may develop."

This was too much for the young lady's tranquillity: she laughed, and laughed frankly.

"Pray tell me," she managed to say, "what *my* number is."

Without the slightest alteration in his serious mien, he consulted a list hanging beside his desk.

"Seven," he announced at length.

"Oh!"

"Why?" quickly. "Has there been some mistake?"

"No--oh, no"; Miss Willis was now perfectly composed. "I had a feeling, though, that it must have been nearer seven thousand."

"It would be impossible, you know," the man patiently explained, "to see that many patients in a day."

"Indeed? How interesting!" Her irony was unnoticed, and once more she laughed. To tell the truth, if anybody could associate such a frivolity with Miss Willis's dignity, she giggled.

She contemplated the man with undisguised curiosity. Naturally enough she had met more men than she could even remember, but never one anything like this particular specimen. To add to her quickened interest, he was not only positively good-looking, but every line of his face, the poise of his well-proportioned, upstanding figure, the tilt of his head and the squareness of his chin, all spoke of strength; of elemental strength, and of a purposeful, resolute character. And, too, she told herself that he had nice eyes. The nice eyes never wavered in their respectful regard of her.

He spoke again:

"I can assure you that Dr. Leonard meant no discourtesy. The new arrangement means nothing further than that your trouble is more distinctively within my province. It is his custom, once he has thoroughly diagnosed a case, to assign it to the one of his assistants best qualified to treat it. Dr. Leonard is a very busy man; he can't be expected to do more than supervise his aides."

And now he was actually rebuking her!

He bowed once more, and moved toward the door. His hand was upon the knob, when an imperious command brought him to a standstill.

"Wait," said Miss Willis. "Dr. Carter, if I remain here--"

He coolly interrupted. "Pardon me, Miss Willis, but my patient is waiting. I shall be at liberty in ten minutes, then I shall return."

This time he was gone.

Number Four must have been an adjoining room, for the next instant she could hear Dr. Carter's voice through the thin board partition. His speech was as unemotional and businesslike as when addressing her. She could not make up her mind whether to go or wait, and so sat

pondering and presently forgot to go.

Here was a man such as she had never dreamed of as existing; one absolutely disinterested, who treated people—even people like Clementine Willis—as abstractly as a master mechanic goes about repairing a worn-out engine. Perhaps it was a characteristically feminine decision at which she presently arrived, but anyway she made up her mind, then and there, to know more of this man.

After a while Miss Willis fell to surveying the room; with an undefined hope, perhaps, that it would throw some further light upon the young doctor's character. It was essentially the home of a busy man. Every article had a use and a definite one. The spirit of the place was contagious, and presently she began to have a feeling that she was the one useless thing there.

In one corner of the room was the desk where he had been writing, upon which was a pile of loose manuscript. Reference books were scattered all about, some with improvised bookmarks, but mostly face downward, just as they had been left. The environment was that of one who seeks to overtake and outstrip Time, rather than to forget him.

Dr. Carter returned at last, entering quickly but quietly.

"Pardon my leaving you so abruptly," he apologized, the impersonal note again in his voice, and an inquiry as well. He seemed surprised that she had not departed.

The girl was manifestly at a loss for words; this was such an extraordinary predicament for her to find herself in that she determined to say something at any cost.

"Dr. Carter," she faltered, "I--have changed my mind; I--I--wish you to continue my treatment--if you will." It was not at all what she had intended saying, and she was chagrined to feel her cheeks grow suddenly hot; she knew that they must be rosy.

It was likely that young Dr. Carter was unused to smiling; but suddenly his eyes were alight. He spoke, and the dry, impersonal note was gone.

"I'm glad," he said. "We hard-working doctors can stand almost anything--without caring a snap of our fingers, too--but when it comes to doubting or questioning--not *our* methods, but those that have been tried and proven, and of which we merely avail ourselves,--why, we can't be expected to waste much sympathy on the scoffers."

He rang the inevitable bell, and gave word to the maid: "Tell Dr. Leonard that Miss Willis has decided to continue her treatment with me."

Now, in the light of the foregoing experience, it was strange that during the next week Miss Willis's throat should require considerably more attention than it ever had under the celebrated specialist's personal ministrations. She made five visits to Dr. Carter, but it could not be said that he had advanced an inch toward the opening she had made. His voice and manner were a bit more sympathetic--and that was all.

Miss Willis seemed to find a keen delight in the fact that her identity, for the time being, was erased by a number; during each visit she made it a point to learn what this number was, treating the matter in a sportive spirit, unbending her wit to ridicule a practice which failed to discriminate among the host of patients who came to see Dr. Leonard.

"For our purposes," Dr. Carter tolerantly explained, "a number more conveniently identifies our patients; their differences are only pathological. A name is easily forgotten, Miss Willis, unless there is some unusual circumstance associated with it, to impress it upon the mind."

She was curious to learn what unusual circumstance had caused him to retain her name, but lacked the temerity to ask. She would have been amazed, unbelieving, had he told her that it was her beauty; that he was clinging rather desperately to the unlovely number, which had no individuality and whose features were altogether neutral and negative.

The change in his manner, when it came, almost took away her breath. It was on the occasion of her last visit. After the familiar preliminary examination, instead of proceeding at once with the treatment, as had been his invariable custom, Dr. Carter walked over to his desk and sat down. For a space he soberly regarded her.

"Miss Willis," said he, presently, "there is nothing whatever the matter with your throat."

She gasped. This calm statement brought confusingly to her mind the circumstance that she had forgotten her throat and its ailment, when, of all considerations, the afflicted member should have been uppermost in her mind. Dr. Carter had not, however, and he must be wondering why she continued to come after the occasion to do so no longer existed. He at once relieved her embarrassment, though.

"I suppose," he said, and she felt a thrill at the note of regret in his voice, "that you will be glad to escape from this hive?"

"No, I shan't," she said, with unnecessary warmth. This involuntary denial surprised even herself, and she blushed.

The smile left Dr. Carter's lips, but he said nothing--merely sat looking at her in his grave way.

Here was to be another period, which Miss Willis could look back upon as one of temporary inability to find words. She started to leave, furious with herself for her inaptness, and instead of going she paused and turned back.

Dr. Carter had risen; he was standing as she had left him. She drew a card from her cardcase.

"You may think what you please of me, Dr. Carter," she said with sudden impulse, extending the card and meeting his look steadily, "but I would be glad if you were to call."

It seemed to take him a long time to read the address. All at once his hands were trembling, and when he looked up the expression in the gray eyes brought a swift tide of color to the girl's face, where it deepened, and deepened, until she tingled from head to foot, and a mist obscured her vision.

"Nothing in all this world would give me more pleasure," said the man.

The girl turned and fled.

That very evening Dr. Carter availed himself of the invitation. Singularly enough, since she had been hoping all the afternoon that he would come, Clementine Willis was frightened when his name was announced. Her hand was shaking when he took it in his; but there was not a trace of expression on his face.

Miss Willis realized, for the first time, that she had been horribly brazen--or, at least, she told herself that she had been--and as a consequence, she was wretchedly ill at ease. Her distress was in marked contrast with the man's self-possession, which amounted almost to indifference. There was no spark visible of the fire which had flashed earlier in the day. It was as though he had steeled himself to remain invulnerable throughout the call.

And the usually composed girl prattled aimlessly, voicing platitudes, conventionalities, banalities, inanities--anything to gain time and to cover her embarrassment: to all of which the man listened in sober silence, watching her steadily.

Abruptly, Miss Willis grew angry with herself, and stopped. When angry she was collected.

Dr. Carter's face lit up humorously.

"You have no idea," he said, "how you have relieved my mind."

The girl looked a question.

"I supposed I was the embarrassed individual," he laughed.

"If you had only given me a hint," suggested the girl, reproachfully. She was now amazed that she had ever lost her grip upon herself, and wondered why she had.

"A hint!" he exclaimed. "I was dumb; I thought you'd see."

The tension was off, and they laughed together. From then on, both remained natural. In the midst of a lull, Dr. Carter suddenly said:

"You'll think me a barbarian, Miss Willis, but I have a request to make. I am in the mood tonight to be unconventional"--the corners of his serious mouth lifted humorously--"to be what I really am," he illuminated, "and to meet you in the same spirit." He paused with a little shrug. "It is a disappointing reversion to the primitive, I must admit." He glanced up whimsically. "May I ask you a question--any question?"

"Do you think it possible," the girl evaded, "for a modern woman to meet you--the way you say--naturally?"

He seemed to question her seriousness.

"I have seen little of women for a number of years," he returned, "but I'd hate to think it impossible."

"Little of women!" was the surprised comment.

"You misunderstand," he quickly corrected. "I go out so seldom that the woman I see is not the real woman at all; not the woman of home." His hand made a little motion of forbearance. "In his consultation-room the patients of a physician are--sexless."

"I think that a woman--that I--can still be natural, Dr. Carter," said Miss Willis, slowly, her eyes downcast. "What did you wish to ask?"

It was his turn to hesitate.

"I hardly know how to put it, now that I have permission," he apologized, with a deprecatory little laugh.

"We seldom do things in this world," he went on at once, "unless we want to, or unless the alternative of not doing them is more unpleasant." He merged generalities into a more specific assertion. "There was no alternative in your requesting me to call. Candidly, why do I interest you?"

His voice was alive, and the woman, now thoroughly mistress of herself, gazed into the frankest of frank gray eyes.

"I scarcely know," she said, weighing her answer. "Perhaps it was the novel experience of being considered--sexless; of being classified by a number, like a beetle in a case. Let me answer with another question: Why did I interest you sufficiently to come?"

He sat in the big chair with his chin in his hand, looking now steadily past and beyond her, one foot restlessly tapping the rug.

"I can't answer without it seeming so hopelessly egotistical." The half-whimsical, half-serious smile returned to his eyes. "Don't let me impose upon your leniency, please; I may wish to make a request sometime again."

"I will accept the responsibility," she insisted.

"On your head, then, the consequences." He spoke lightly, but with a note of restlessness and rebellion.

"To me you are attractive, Miss Willis, because you are everything that I am not. With you there is no necessity higher than the present; no responsibility beyond the chance thought of the moment. You choose your surroundings, your thoughts. Your life is what you make it: it is life."

"You certainly would not charge me with being more independent than you?" protested the girl.

"Independent!" he flashed upon her, and she knew she had stirred something lying close to his soul. His voice grew soft, and he repeated the word, musingly, more to himself than to her: "Independent!"

"Yes," with abrupt feeling, "with the sort of independence that chooses its own manner of absolute dependence; with the independence that gives you only so much of my time, so that the remainder may go to another; with the independence of imperative impartiality; the sort of independence that is never through working and planning for others--that's the independence I know."

"But there are breathing-spells," interrupted Miss Willis, smilingly. "To-night, for example, you are not working for somebody else."

"You compel me to incriminate myself," he rejoined, the whimsical, half-serious smile again lighting his gray eyes. "I should be working now, and I will have to make up the lost time when I go home." He bowed gallantly. "The pleasure is double with me, you observe; I do not think twice about paying a double price for it."

He spoke lightly, almost mockingly; but beneath the surface there was even the bitter ring of revolt, and constantly before the girl were the little gestures, intense, impatient, that conveyed a meaning he did not voice. She could feel in it all the insistent atmosphere of the town, where time is counted by seconds. She wondered that he felt as he did, ignorant that the disquiet had come into his life only during the past week. To her, the glimpse of activity was fascinating simply because it was in sharp contrast with her life of comparative, dull emptiness.

He caught the wistful look on her face.

"You wonder that I rebel," he said, with an odd little throaty laugh. "I couldn't well appear any more unsophisticated: I might as well tell you. It's not the work itself, but the lack of anything else but work that makes the lives of such as I so bare. We are constantly holding a stop-watch on time itself, fearful of losing a second; the scratch of a pen sealing the life of a Nation, commuting a death-sentence, defining the difference between a man's success and ruin can all be accomplished in a second. If we let that second get away from us, we have been deaf to Opportunity's knock. We stop at times to think; and then the object for which we give our all appears so petty and inadequate, and what we are losing, so great. We laugh at our work at such times, and for the moment hate it." But he laughed lightly, and finished with a deprecating little minor.

"You see, I'm relaxing to-night--and thinking."

"But," Miss Willis protested, "I don't see why you should have only the one thing in your life. It is certainly unnecessary, unless you choose."

He smiled indulgently.

"You have no conception of what it means to shape your life to your income. I am poor, and I know. Years ago I had to choose between mediocrity and"--he looked at her peculiarly--"and love, or advancement alone. I had to choose, and fixing my choice upon the higher aim, I had to put everything else out of my life. The thought is intolerable that my name should always be under another's upon some office-door. You know what I chose: you know nothing of the constant struggle which alone keeps me, mind, soul, and body, centred upon my ideal, nor how readily I respond to a temptation to turn aside.

"This," he completed listlessly, "is one of the nights when the price seems too large; in spite of me, regret will creep in."

"But," persisted the girl, "when you succeed--it will not be--too late?" There was a plaintive inquiry in the words; the tragedy of the man's life had awakened pity.

He spoke with a sudden passion that startled her.

"It is too late already; my work has refashioned my life. I am desperately restless except when doing something that counts; something visible; and doing it intensely. I'll never"--his voice was bitter with regret--"never conform--now."

The girl answered, almost unconsciously.

"I think you can," she hesitated, "and will."

For a long, long moment they searched each other's eyes.

"And this price you are paying," said the girl at last, "is it worth it?"

The man drew a long breath.

"Ah, I wonder! To-night doubt has undermined my resolution."

"If you question yourself so seriously," she said very softly, "then surely you can find but one

answer.”

“Again I wonder. I have wondered and--and hoped--God help me!--since the moment I looked into your eyes.”

Suddenly he was out of his chair and coming toward her. Her heart leaped, her eyes shone; she extended her hands in welcome.

“Then you will come again,” she whispered, as they drew together.

“If you will let me. I couldn’t stay away now.”

THE END

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