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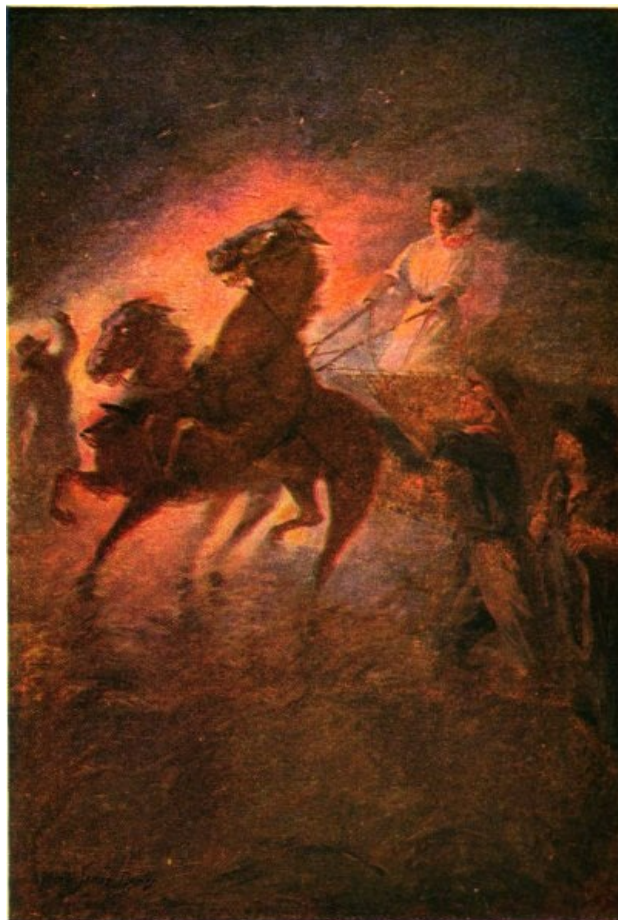
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"GET HOLD OF THE BEASTS, SOME OF YOU. IT'S MRS. LELAND. SHE'S A DAISY!"—[Page 297](#)

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By
HAROLD BINDLOSS

AUTHOR OF
"Alton of Somasco," etc.



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ALFRED JAMES DEWEY

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CHAPTER I

BARROCK-HOLME

It was a hot September afternoon. Leland wondered vaguely how the harvesting and threshing were progressing in his own far distant country, as he leant on the moss-grown wall of the terrace beneath the old house of Barrock-holme. He had been a week there now as the guest of Lieutenant Denham, whose acquaintance he had originally made out on the wide prairie in Western Canada, and for whom he had a certain liking that was slightly tinged with contempt. The estate would be Jimmy Denham's some day, provided that his father succeeded in keeping it out of the grasp of his creditors. Those who knew the old man well fancied that he might with difficulty accomplish it, for Branscombe Denham of Barrock-holme was not troubled by many scruples, and had acquired considerable proficiency in the evasion of debts.

The mansion stood on the brink of a ravine in the desolate border marshes. Part of it had been built to stand a siege in the days of the Scottish wars. The strong square tower was intact and habitable still; the rest of the low building stretched round three sides of a quadrangle, with a dry moat across the fourth, beyond which lawn and flower-garden lay shielded from the shrewd border winds by tall, lichened walls. Through an archway one could look down, across silver-stemmed birches and dusky firs, upon the Barrock flashing in the depths of the ravine. [Pg 4]

Leland found the prospect pleasant as he lounged there, with a cigar in his hand. He was accustomed to his own country, and there was something congenial and, in a fashion, familiar in the sweep of lonely moorlands and bleak Scottish hills which stretched, shining warm in the paling sunlight, along the northern horizon. It reminded him of his own country, which was even more wild and desolate, on the southern border of Western Canada. He had been three months in England, and was already longing to be home again, though he had found what he called the hardness of the North congenial.

It was a land of legends and traditions, of which they were rather proud at Barrock-holme. The grey tower had more than once been beset by the border spears, on whom the dragon's mouth on the wall above had spouted boiling oil. There was an oak on the edge of the ravine which had borne bitter fruit in the days of foray, and—for the men of Barrock-holme could strike back tellingly then—the quadrangle had been filled with Scottish cattle. They were grim, hard men, and what he had heard of their doings appealed to Leland. He himself was in some respects a hard man, and rather primitive. The life of the wardens of Barrock-holme and the moss-troopers was rather more comprehensible to him than the one of which he had had brief glimpses in London. [Pg 5]

While he stood there, Jimmy Denham came along the terrace, and stopped beside him.

"You're not going down to join them?" he said, indicating with a little wave of a particularly well-shaped hand the white-clad figures that flitted to and fro across a sunken square of turf beyond the lawn.

"No," said Leland. "I don't play tennis well. In fact, I don't play any of your games. I never had time to learn them."

Denham sat down upon the wall and looked at him languidly. He was a well-favoured young man, tall and fair, with pale blue eyes, and distinguished by a finicking, almost feminine daintiness in dress and person, though he was proficient in most manly sports and a soldier. His friends, however, were aware that his fastidiousness was much less noticeable in his character.

"One can't do everything," he said lazily. "I don't know that I've seen another beginner show quite as good form at billiards as you do. I'll play you fifty with the same allowance as last time. It will be some time yet before dinner."

"Not just now. It seems to me I've had about enough of billiards for one week. To be quite straight, one finds learning your amusements a trifle expensive, and I'm not sure they're worth it. You see, I'm not going to stay here forever, and once I go back, it will probably be a very long while before I take part in any of them again."

Denham laughed with undiminished good-humour. "Well," he said, "though I have taken a little out of you, the acquisition of knowledge is usually more or less costly. There's a couple of hours to put in, anyway. What would you like to do?" [Pg 6]

"I don't mind poker, if you'll make it high enough."

Denham saw the little twinkle in his eyes, and languidly shook his head.

"No," he said; "I rather fancy you would have me there. The suggestion's a bit significant, and I have a notion your nerve's too good. Of course, it isn't very sporting to say no, but I really can't afford to face a risk just now."

"Which was probably why you wanted to play billiards with me?"

Denham regarded him reproachfully for a moment or two, and then made a little gesture. "That coming from some people might be considered offensive, but nobody seems to mind how you express yourself, although your observations aren't always particularly delicate. Still, I'm willing to admit that I want fifty pounds rather worse than I generally do."

"I wonder," said Leland, with a trace of dryness, "if you would take it amiss if I offered to lend it to you?"

Jimmy Denham smiled delicately where another man would have grinned. "Not in the least! In

fact, I should consider myself distinctly obliged to you."

"Then you shall have a cheque after dinner."

Denham thanked him without effusion. One could almost have fancied that it was he who was conferring the favour. As Leland listened, a little sardonic smile crept into his eyes. He was known in his own country as a shrewd man, and was quite aware that he ran some risk in lending his comrade fifty pounds. But Jimmy had done him one or two kindnesses, and that counted for much with Leland.

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"Who is the very pretty girl who has just come into the tennis ground?" he asked.

"My sister," said Denham. "I had almost forgotten you had not met Carrie. She is rather pretty, though. While the governor and I are Denhams, she takes after the other side of the family in more ways than one. She has only just come from Town, you know."

Leland did not know. He had merely heard that there was a Carrie Denham; but as he looked down across the moat he was conscious of a sudden interest in the girl. She stood with one hand on the back of a basket-chair, her long white dress flowing in easy lines about her tall and shapely figure. So far as he could see it, her face beneath the big white hat was attractive, too; but it was her pose that vaguely impressed him. There was a suggestion of strength and pride in it that was by no means noticeable in the case of either her father or Jimmy Denham. The appearance of the man with whom she talked was, however, much less pleasing. He was inclined to be portly, his face was coarsely fleshy, with the distinctive stamp of the city on him. He looked out of place in that quaint old pleasance on the desolate border side. He reminded Leland forcibly of the caricatures he had seen of Hebrew usurers.

"And the gentleman?" he asked.

Denham laughed. "You would expect his name to be Moses, or Levy, but, as a matter of fact, it isn't. Anyway, he calls himself Aylmer. A friend of the governor's, and the usual something in the city. Comes down for a week or two at the partridges, ostensibly, at least, though it's quite possible there will be a dog or two, and, perhaps, a keeper, disabled before he goes away. If you care to come down, I'll present you to Carrie. She knows you are here, and is no doubt a trifle curious about you."

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If she was, Miss Denham concealed the fact very well, and Leland, who was not readily embarrassed, felt a quite unusual diffidence as she held out a little white hand. He noticed, however, that she looked at him frankly, and that she had a beautiful hand, like the rest of the Denhams. Her face was cold and somewhat colourless, with dusky hair low on the broad forehead, unusually straight brows, and dark eyes; a beautiful face it seemed to him, but one that had a vague suggestion of weariness in it just then. Carrie Denham, he thought, in no way resembled her easy-going brother Jimmy. There was, as he expressed it to himself, more grit in her; and yet he was, without exactly knowing why, rather sorry for her. She was evidently not more than three or four-and-twenty, and he felt there must be a reason for her quietness and reserve, which appeared a trifle unnatural.

She, on her part, saw a tall and wiry rather than stalwart man, some four or five years older than herself, especially straight of limb, holding himself well, whilst his bronzed face, which was otherwise of brown-eyed, English type, showed undoubted force. He was, she fancied, a man accustomed to exert authority, but not exactly what in the most restricted English sense of the word would be called a gentleman. At least, he was evidently one who earned his living, and his hands were curiously brown and hard, while the manner in which he wore his shooting clothes suggested that he seldom wasted much time over his toilet.

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"I hope you will find your stay at Barrock-holme pleasant," she said. "In weather like this the birds should lie well. You have not been here long?"

"A week," said Leland.

Jimmy Denham had in the meanwhile passed on. His sister glanced at the fleshy Aylmer, who was about to move the chair for her.

"No," she said in a coldly even voice, "you need not trouble. I am not going to stay here. Have they shown you our dripping-well yet, Mr. Leland?"

Leland, who said he had not seen it, surmised that Miss Denham desired to be rid of her other cavalier; but Aylmer, who protested that he had an absorbing interest in dripping-wells, was not to be shaken off, so they crossed the lawn and went out through the archway together. Then Leland stopped a moment and flashed a questioning glance at Carrie Denham, for the strip of pathway outside the wall was, perhaps, two feet wide, and he could look almost straight down through the tops of the birch trees upon the Barrock flashing in the hollow a hundred and fifty feet below. He was thinking that it would probably go hard with anybody who stumbled there. A railed walk led in the opposite direction.

Carrie Denham, however, met his gaze with a faint, understanding smile, and he followed her in single file until the path grew broader beyond a bend of the wall. Then looking round he saw, as he half-expected, that the passage had apparently been too much for the third of the party. In another moment he met the girl's glance again.

"I hope you were not afraid?" she said.

Leland's eyes twinkled, but he made no disclaimer, which, for no apparent reason, seemed to please her.

"There is, of course, another path," she said.

"So I should surmise!" said Leland. "Do you really wish to show me the well?"

The girl laughed for the first time, and the swift change in her face almost startled the man. The coldness and reserve had gone, and for a moment she was, it seemed to him, subtly alluring.

"Well," she said, "I have to justify myself, and somebody may ask you what you think of it. Under the circumstances, it might be better to go on, although the way is often a little muddy when one gets among the trees."

Leland was fancying that it must have been muddier than usual, or she would not have ventured there, when they reached a spot where a tiny stream came trickling out of a hollow shrouded with sombre firs. A few stones had evidently once been laid in the moss and mire; but some of them had sunk, and the gaps were wide between. Carrie Denham stopped and surveyed them dubiously.

"I haven't been here for a long while, but I don't like to turn back," she said.

"Or the men who do?"

She flashed a little, swift glance at him, but his face was expressionless. "That goes without saying."

Leland glanced down at her little bronze shoes. "Of course, there is usually a way; but the trouble is that I am a stranger. If I were in my own country, I should suggest a very simple means of getting you over."

The girl looked at him with something in her eyes that suggested ironical appreciation of his boldness, but her only action was to shake her head.

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"It is just as well you are not," she said. "We are a little less primitive here."

"Then," said Leland, "I guess we must try the other way."

He plunged boldly into the mossy quagmire, into which he sank well above his ankles, and held out his hand to her. She noticed as she sprang from stone to stone how hard it was and how firm his grasp. It seemed to her that what this man took hold of he would not easily let go, an impression she remembered afterwards.

She crossed dry-shod, and Leland did not seem in the least concerned at the water squishing in his shoes. There was then a scramble up the hillside under the shadowy firs until they reached the well, which Leland promptly decided was not very much to look at. It lay at the head of a little green hollow, a wall of fissured limestones sprinkled with mosses and tufted with hartstongue fern from the midst of which the water splashed drip by drip into a shallow basin. Carrie Denham turned and glanced at him with a trace of somewhat chilly amusement in her face.

"You are no doubt wondering if I haven't wasted your time," she said. "Still, now you are here, you may as well notice that the water has rather curious properties. If you will pull out one of these sticks, for instance, you will see what is happening to them."

Leland stooped and drew out a slender birch branch, whose feathery twigs were changing into what looked very like silver lace. The stem was also crusted with a white deposit, and it cost him a little effort to snap it across. Then he looked up at his companion with a smile as he saw that the interior was still soft.

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"Do you know that you strike me as being very like this twig?" he said, and she noticed for the first time his Western accent and modulation. "The hardness is all outside."

"Whatever made you say that?"

Leland met her half-indignant gaze gravely. "Well," he said with a little deprecatory gesture, "I have seen you laugh."

"Ah," said Carrie, "there was a time when I laughed rather more frequently than I do now. I should, however, like to point out that the stick had not been in quite long enough."

Leland still looked at her with a quizzical expression. "I think I know what you mean," he said. "Still, I should scarcely have fancied you would have felt it yet. Anyway, that's not the question; and, perhaps, it wouldn't do for me to make you stop here. There will be other people wanting to talk to you."

They turned back together, this time taking the easier way. As they passed along a tall hedge, Leland heard a rustling on its other side and darted impulsively through, leaving his astonished companion without a word. Following through a gap, she came upon him as he picked up a rabbit from the grass. The little creature's eyes were protruding in an agony of strangulation, and a thin brass wire hung from its red-smeared fur. Then Leland either saw or heard her, for he turned his back to the hedge, and flung over his shoulder what seemed to her rather too like a command.

"Go back!" he said. "This is not a thing for you to see."

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Carrie Denham went back, though she was more accustomed to do what pleased her, and make others do it, than to do what she was told. It was a minute or two before Leland joined her, grim in face, an ominous sparkle in his eyes.

"It was only half-choked, so I put it back in a burrow," he said. "It would have pleased me to hang the brute who set that wire."

Carrie Denham watched him with interest. "I believe it is the usual way of catching them."

"Then," said Leland grimly, "there must be something very wrong with the folks who allow that abominable cruelty to go on. The little beast might have struggled there for hours in horrible pain before it choked itself in its agony."

The girl fancied that abominable was not the adjective he had wanted to employ, but she said nothing further on the subject, though there remained with her the picture of him holding the little furry creature with womanly gentleness while he slackened the torturing wire. It was made even more impressive when, on suggesting hanging for the man who had laid the snare, something in his face and voice left her with the conviction that he would on due occasion be capable of carrying out his suggestion. He was, she decided, altogether different from the men she usually saw. When he left her in the quadrangle, she contrived to fall in with her brother.

"Who is he?" she asked.

"Charley Leland," said Jimmy with his nearest approach to a grin.

"I know that already."

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"I can't tell you very much more, and no doubt you'll find out what you want to know for yourself. I spent a month shooting round his place in Western Canada, and made him promise if ever he came over he'd look in upon me here. Then I met him in London a few weeks ago."

"What does he do out there?"

"Farm, on a lordly scale. I forget how many thousand acres he has under wheat, and how many steers he owns; but he's rather a famous man in Assiniboia. His father was, I believe, an Englishman, but he died when Leland was young, and the farm and the stock-run have doubled in the hands of the son. That's about all, except that I rather like the man. He has his strong points, but needs handling. I fancy any one who roused him would see the devil."

Carrie Denham asked no more questions, but went somewhat thoughtfully to her room. On the whole she felt a mild interest in Charley Leland.

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CHAPTER II

LELAND IS ROUSED TO PITY

The evening was unusually soft and clear, and a warm, gentle breeze kept the dew from settling. Leland strolled out on the terrace above the moat at Barrock-holme. He had spent a fortnight there now, and was beginning to find the easy-going life of its inmates somewhat pleasant, though at first it had caused him contemptuous astonishment. Nobody appeared to have any duties; or, if they had, he surmised that they were seldom attended to. People got up at all hours, and some of them seldom retired before the morning. Whenever he walked over the estate with Jimmy Denham, he noticed many things that pained his eyes. There was land that lay rushy and sour for the need of draining, the roads in the Barrock hollow were so ill-kept and rutted that he wondered how any one could haul a full load along them, and rotting gates and tottering dry-stone walls dotted the entire acreage. At Barrock-holme, waste and short-sighted parsimony that defeated its own object apparently went hand-in-hand. Once he ventured to point out to Jimmy what was in his mind.

"If you put four or five thousand pounds into the land, you would be astonished at what it would give you back," he said.

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Jimmy Denham laughed. "The question is, where we would get the four thousand pounds. We are, as you have no doubt noticed, confoundedly hard-up, and a tenant with capital enough to stand a decent rent would think twice before he took a farm from us."

"I guess I wouldn't blame him," said Leland drily. "But what you folks spend personally in a couple of years would set the place on its feet."

"It is very probable," and Jimmy laughed again. "Still, you see, you can't always live as you should in this country. Of course, I could cut the service, and we might let the house to a shooting tenant; that is, the thing is physically practicable. The trouble is that it wouldn't suit me, and the governor would veto it right off if it did. To be candid, there is no particular capacity for hard

work and self-denial in any of the family."

Leland made no further suggestions. On the last point, he quite concurred with Jimmy; but his own life hitherto had been one of strenuous endeavour and Spartan simplicity, and it was pleasant to feel the strain relaxed for a month or two.

On the night in question he was quite content with circumstances and his surroundings, as he strolled out on the terrace an hour after dinner with his cigar. There was a clear moon above him, and in the air a faint, astringent smell of falling leaves. The splashing of the Barrock came up musically athwart the birches in the hollow.

As he was strolling up and down the terrace in the evening dress no longer strange to him, he saw Carrie Denham come out from one of the long windows that opened into the old stone gallery. A glance about him showed Aylmer, to whom he felt an intuitive aversion, hovering big and fat in the vicinity. He fancied that the girl saw Aylmer, too, for she came down the staircase at the end of the gallery farthest from him and moved in Leland's direction. She wore a light evening gown, a fleecy white wrap concealing her shoulders and part of her dark hair. Flowing straight to the delicate incurving of waist, it emphasised by suggestion the outline of her shapely figure. Leland felt a little thrill as she came towards him. He surmised that she merely desired to make use of him for the purpose of ridding herself of Aylmer's company, or, perhaps, as an incentive to the latter; but that did not matter. Leland was shrewd enough to be aware of his own disabilities; and, no matter what her motive, she looked ethereally beautiful with the soft moonlight upon her.

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"You need not throw the cigar away," she said, when she stopped and seated herself on an old stone bench close to where he stood. "In fact, I should be rather sorry if you did."

"Thank you," said Leland, with a little smile. "It would be a pity. Jimmy gave me two or three of them, and they're unusually good."

"One would fancy that you were not in the habit of throwing anything away?" she half asked, half said.

Again the twinkle flashed in Leland's eyes. "Until I came to England I don't think I ever wasted anything, effort or material, in my life. That is, when I knew what I was doing, at least."

"Ah," said Carrie, "you would soon get into the way of doing it at Barrock-holme. Still, why aren't you playing bridge or billiards? Was the long day on the moors too much for you? I believe you walked home."

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"So did Jimmy. It was only four miles. I have quite often ridden sixty in my own country, and, when it's light, I usually begin to work there at four in the morning."

"You are a farmer?"

"Yes, as it's understood out there. Our wheat furrows at Prospect would run straight across four of the biggest holdings on this property, and I've over a thousand cattle on the new range among the willow bluffs. A farm of that kind requires looking after, with wheat at present figures."

"You give all your time to it?"

"Every minute until the snow comes, and we usually begin hauling grain in to the railroad on the bob-sledges then. In summer it's work from sun-up until it's dark, and you go to sleep in ten minutes after you come in."

Carrie Denham's little shudder might have expressed either horror or sympathy.

"Isn't that, in one way, a waste of life? You have no amusement at all?" she asked.

"An hour or two after the antelope, or the brent geese in the sloos in fall and spring, when the salt pork runs out. As to the other question, there are people who want the wheat we raise. Some of them want it badly in your own English towns. A man's life was given him to use at what suits him best. It's taking quite a responsibility to fritter it away."

Carrie Denham had naturally heard this sentiment expressed before, though she had never seen it taken seriously among her own friends and family. She glanced at her companion curiously, rather resenting his flinging maxims of that kind at her. It rankled more when she realised that there was nothing about the speaker to suggest the trifler or the prig. As a new sensation, he was undoubtedly interesting.

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"And you never take a holiday?" she asked.

"This is the first one, and I mightn't have taken it if several four-bushel bags of wheat hadn't fallen on me in the granary. The doctor we brought out two hundred miles to see me wouldn't let me do anything active when I commenced to crawl round again."

"I think Jimmy said you were quite young when you were left alone."

"I had been three months at McGill—which is to us much the same thing as your Oxford is to you—when the news of my father's death came, and I went back and fought my trustees over what was to be done with the farm. They were two of the cleverest grain and cattle men in Winnipeg, and I was a raw lad, but I beat them. I was to stay at McGill and be educated while they let or

sold the place, they said; but I had my way of it and, instead, went back to the prairie where I belonged. Prospect has doubled the acreage it had then."

Carrie Denham listened with slightly languid interest. The narrative had been a bit egotistical, but she could imagine the struggle the lonely lad had waged with the wilderness. She understood already that it was an especially desolate wilderness in which the Prospect farm stood, and Jimmy had told her that Leland had neither brother nor sister. He had made his own way, and had, no doubt, from his point of view, done a good deal with his life; but his outlook was, it seemed to her, necessarily restricted. One should not, however, expect too much from a man born in the wilderness who had had only three months of what could be considered education. She also wondered why he had told her so much, since most of the young men she came across took some trouble to keep their best side uppermost, until it occurred to her that he probably considered the doubling of the acreage of the Prospect farm a very notable achievement. It scarcely seemed to her to warrant the effort. She loved pleasure. Though she was by no means without a sense of duty, the little graces and amenities of life counted for much with her.

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Aylmer and two of the other guests came along the terrace, and Leland looked at her with a little inquiring smile.

"Shall I go on talking? I can keep it up if you wish," he said.

"No," said the girl. "You have really done enough in the meanwhile."

She rose and joined the others, and Leland was left wondering exactly what she meant, though it was borne in upon him that she did not object to Aylmer so much when he had a companion. Then he also rose, and strolled along to where a little faded lady of uncertain age, who had shown him some trifling kindness, was sitting alone. She swept her dress aside to let him pass, looking at him with a smile, but he seated himself on the broad-topped wall in front of her.

"Why are you not playing cards, or making love to somebody? Don't you know what you are here for?" she said.

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Leland laughed. "I'm afraid I'm not good at either, Mrs. Annersly. You see, I'm from the wilderness."

"Well," said the lady, "there are, I fancy, one or two young women who would be willing to teach you the rules of one game."

"Are you sure they would think it worth while to waste powder and shot on a prairie farmer?"

"They might, if it was understood that he was willing to sell his broad acres and settle down to the simple pleasures of an English country life."

"No, by the Lord!" said Leland. "You will excuse me, madam, but I really meant it."

Mrs. Annersly laughed. "I believe you did. Still, you must remember that there are not many English estates managed like Barrock-holme. In fact, one may observe traces of, at least, a moderate prosperity in parts of this country; but we needn't talk of that. You will notice that a few of the others besides ourselves have sense enough to prefer being outside on such a pleasant night."

Leland looked down across the lawn, conscious that she was watching him meanwhile, and saw Carrie Denham and Aylmer cross it together. The moonlight was upon them, and the silvery radiance that made the girl's beauty more apparent seemed to emphasise the grossness of her companion. In that space of grass and flowers, moated and hemmed in by mouldering walls that had flung back the keen winds of the border for five hundred years, Aylmer looked more out of place than he had done by daylight. Leland, who had read no little English history, could almost have fancied it was filled with memories of the old knightly days when the spears of Etrick and Liddesdale came pricking across the brown moors and mosses on many such a night; while Aylmer was from the cities, heavy-fleshed, soft of muscle, and sensual, of a wholly modern type.

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"Yes," he said drily; "I see two of them."

Mrs. Annersly laughed again. "So does Branscombe Denham, I surmise, but that in all probability does not concern you or me." She stopped, and flashed a swift glance at her companion. Seeing that he made no denial, she changed the subject. "You have been taking billiard lessons from Jimmy Denham. Don't you find it expensive?"

"Madam," said Leland, "Jimmy Denham is rather a friend of mine."

"Of course. He is also my relative—which is, however, no great advantage to him. Besides, I am a privileged person, an encumbrance the Denhams are scarcely likely to get rid of in the present state of their affairs, which is, perhaps, a little unfortunate for everybody. My tongue is supposed to be dipped in wormwood, nobody expects anything pleasant from me, and the weak points in the Denhams constitute my special hobby. As you have probably noticed, they have a good many."

Leland looked at her gravely. "You couldn't expect me to admit it, and, if I did, you wouldn't be pleased with me. In different ways they have all of them been kind to me."

"Have you asked yourself why?"

"I certainly haven't," said Leland, a trifle sharply.

"Well," said the lady, with an air of reflection, "there is usually a reason for most things, though it is, perhaps, a little clearer in Aylmer's case. They have been somewhat attentive to him, too. Branscombe Denham is one of the most improvident of men, and in that respect Jimmy is very like him; but, while the strength of the whole family is in the girls, there is one thing to their credit: they all stand by one another through thick and thin. I fancy there is very little Carrie would stop at if it was necessary to save the old man, or, perhaps, Jimmy, from disaster." [Pg 23]

She turned her head a bit. As it happened, Carrie Denham and Aylmer crossed the lawn again just then, and Leland, following the direction of Mrs. Annersly's glance, felt that she wished to call his attention to them.

"Yes," she said, "unless something unexpected turns up, I should not be astonished if they married her to that man."

Leland looked at her, a slight flush in his grim face. "It would be almost indecent for several reasons, to say nothing of his age; but Miss Denham has surely a will of her own."

Though he seldom manifested the tenderness and pity in his nature until an opportunity for helpful action came his way, his face grew softer as he watched the pair. His life had of necessity been hard and lonely. Perhaps, in some degree at least, from ignorance of them, he had grown up with an impersonal, chivalrous respect for all women. Love as between man and woman was a thing still remote from him. On the desolate prairie, a woman was scarcely ever even seen. It was a man's country. As his eyes followed the strolling couple, he was conscious of a longing to offer the girl the protection of his strength against Aylmer. [Pg 24]

Then the lady, who had been watching him closely, spoke again. "She decidedly has a will, and, what is more, a tolerably large share of the family pride," she said. "Still, she will probably marry her companion. Branscombe Denham is usually at his wits' end for money, and Jimmy, I am very much afraid, has been getting into difficulties again. Carrie is in one sense an excellent daughter. She knows her duty, and is scarcely likely to flinch from doing it."

"But is there nobody else, no young man of good character and family, available?"

"What do you know against the character of the man yonder?"

"Nothing," said Leland tersely. "Nothing at all, except that he carries it about with him. You can see it in his face. If I had a sister, I should feel tempted to kick a man of that kind for looking at her."

Mrs. Annersly smiled as she answered his previous question. "Young men of the kind you mention, with any means, are not to be met with every day. What's more, they also naturally prefer a girl with money, and, at least, there would in their case be a tying up of property in the settlements. The happy man does not, as a rule, consider it necessary to contribute anything to the bride's family."

Leland turned sharply, and looked at her with a portentous sparkle in his eyes. "Isn't it a horribly unpleasant thing you are suggesting?"

"That is, after all, largely a matter of opinion."

Leland sat still a moment watching the two figures on the lawn with a curious blending of compassion and disgust. Then he rose and looked down on his companion. [Pg 25]

"Madam," he said, "I wonder if I might ask you why you thought fit to tell me this?"

"One should never ask for a woman's reasons, and I think I have informed you already that my tongue is dipped in wormwood."

Leland made a little impatient gesture. "Is it Aylmer's money alone that counts with them, or his station, if he has any?"

"One would certainly imagine that it was his means."

Leland left her presently. As she watched him stride along the terrace, her shrewd, faded face grew gentle.

"If I have read that man aright, there may be results," she said. "In that case, I almost fancy Carrie will have much to thank me for."

Then she rose and, crossing the quadrangle, sought the card-room. It was an hour later when she came upon Carrie Denham sitting alone.

"I have been talking to Mr. Leland, and am rather pleased with him," she said to the girl. "He is a curious compound of simplicity and forcefulness. They must live like anchorites out there."

Carrie Denham laughed. "I thought that type was distinctly out of date now. It probably has its disadvantages."

"Still," said Mrs. Annersly with an air of reflection, "he would scarcely jar as much on one's self-respect as the people one would meet as the wife of the other sort of man."

CHAPTER III

PRESSURE OF CIRCUMSTANCES

The early breakfast over, Leland was walking up and down beneath the red beeches that grew close up to the old arched gateway of Barrock-holme, one of his fellow guests beside him, and a gun under his arm. Looking in through the quadrangle, they saw a young groom holding with some difficulty a restive, champing horse that pawed the gravel and shook his head impatiently.

"He doesn't like waiting either," said Leland's companion to the groom. "How long have you been holding him here?"

"About half an hour, Mr. Terry," said the groom.

Terry glanced at Leland with a little uplifting of his brows, and again addressed the groom.

"You can't pack all of us into that dog-cart, and it's four miles, anyway, to the edge of Garberry moor," he said. "Do you know how we are expected to get there?"

"Mr. Parsons of the Dell farm keeps a smart cart, and he promised to lend it Mr. James when he heard we had the tire loose on our other one. It should have been here."

"Then why isn't it?"

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Leland fancied that a suspicion of a smile flickered in the man's eyes.

"I don't know, sir, unless Mr. James forgot to let him know when we wanted it."

"I should consider it very probable," said Terry drily. "Have you any objections to walking on as far as the Dell, Leland? It wouldn't astonish me greatly if Jimmy kept us waiting an hour yet."

Leland having no objections, they strode away together. Beech-mast crackled underfoot between the colonnades of lichened trunks, whose great branches stayed the high, vaulted roof of gold and crimson leaves. Looking out through the openings between, one could see the sweep of rolling champaign stretch away into the horizon through gradations of blueness, and the rigid line of the fells smeared with warm brown patches of withered bracken.

"It's rather a shame that Jimmy and his father should have a place of this kind in their hands at all," said Terry. "Still, for the credit of the country, I should like to explain that there are not very many English properties run on the same lines. In fact, the Denhams are an exception to everything, but I really think Jimmy might have got up in time for once in a way."

Leland laughed. "The loss of an hour's shooting seems to count with you."

"It does. You see, like a good many other people, I have to work rather hard for my living, and time is of a little more value to me than it apparently is to Jimmy Denham. Besides, my stay here has cost me a good deal more than I expected, and, being engaged in commerce, I can't help feeling that I ought to get something in return for my money."

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"I don't quite understand that last remark."

"No?" said Terry. "Well, perhaps you don't. In fact, I have had a fancy that you were a bona-fide guest. You see, two or three of us aren't."

"Will you make that a little clearer?" And Leland looked astonished, though he remembered now several little incidents that had struck him as strange.

"With pleasure. Indeed, I feel I owe it to Jimmy for his losing us an hour or two every day. Our amusement costs two or three of us a good deal directly, as well as the other way. Branscombe Denham, naturally, doesn't advertise Barrock-holme as a shooting hotel, but, though affairs are arranged more tastefully, it amounts to much the same thing. You share expenses of watching and turning down hand-reared birds, and you get so many days' shooting with entertainment thrown in. The latter, however, is usually costly. One way or the other, Jimmy has taken one hundred pounds out of me."

"Ah," said Leland. "Is that sort of thing common in this country? I had a notion that you were rather proud of yourselves. It wouldn't strike us as quite nice in Western Canada."

"No," said the other man. "Still, it's done occasionally, and, as to family pride, you are not likely to come across anybody who has more of it than the Denhams. How they reconcile it with some of the things they do is a different matter; but you can take it as a rule that the less people have to congratulate themselves upon, the prouder they are. In fact, Jimmy Denham, who, though one can't help liking him, is a downright bad egg, was at first a little shy of me. I am a partner in a concern making a certain advertised specialty, you see."

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"I wonder," said Leland reflectively, "if the girls quite understand the position."

"I don't think they do. Anyway, not exactly. Indeed, it's a little difficult to believe they're daughters of Branscombe Denham, or sisters of Jimmy. They show some trace of sense and temper, whilst you can't ruffle Jimmy. Still, I fancy, if it were necessary, they would stand by their delightful relatives through thick and thin."

Leland lapsed into thoughtful silence. He fancied that his companion was right, for he had seen a good deal of Carrie Denham during the month he had now spent at Barrock-holme. She had been, in her own reserved fashion, gracious to him, and Leland did not in the least resent the fact that there was in all she said a suggestion of condescension that he surmised was unconscious. Indeed, this struck him as being what it should be. Though quite aware of his own value where men were concerned, he had seen very few women, and regarded them in general with a vague, uncomprehending respect. Furthermore, the girl's physical beauty, her pride and almost stately coldness, made a strong appeal to him. She was, he was quite willing to admit, a being of a very different order from a plain Western farmer. Besides that, she was the one person who had quite come up to his expectations, for his visit to the old country had in most respects brought him disillusionment.

His father had often spoken of it with all the exile's appreciation of the home he had left, and he could remember his mother's daintiness and refinement; it was, perhaps, not astonishing that he had learned to idealise the old land and those who lived in it. It was also unfortunate that, whilst it might have happened differently, the few English men and women he had met on any terms of intimacy during his stay in London had resembled the Denhams more or less, and it had hurt him to discover what he considered was the reality. For Jimmy and his father he had a tolerant contempt, and it was, in fact, only the presence of Carrie Denham that had kept him at Barrock-holme so long. He was sorry for her, and had a vague fancy that she might need a friend. There was a vein of chivalry in him, and he was also a just man. His sense of justice led him to play billiards periodically for somewhat heavy stakes with Jimmy. It was one way of getting even, as he expressed it, for he did not care to be indebted to a man he looked down upon. Jimmy, who was skilful and almost suspiciously fortunate at both billiards and cards, had also no objections to emptying the pockets of his guests, though, as Leland was aware, the chance stranger very seldom leaves a ranch of Western Canada any poorer than when he came there.

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In the meanwhile it happened that Branscombe Denham sat talking to his son in what he called his library. The few books in it for the most part related to the estate, for Denham had reasons for not trusting his affairs altogether to a steward or country lawyer. He was, in some respects, a handsome man, though his eyes were of too pale a blue, and his thin face, in spite of its unmistakable stamp of refinement, lacked character. The room was in the old tower, ceiled with dark wood and sombrely panelled, with one long, narrow leaded-glass window. The tall, sparely-framed man with his white hands and immaculate dress seemed out of place there. He was essentially modern, the room belonged to the more virile past. There was a pile of letters before him, and he took one up delicately.

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"If I could have foreseen that it would lead to this kind of thing, I should never have consented to your grandfather's breaking the entail," he said, with a little whimsical smile. "Lancelly has written me in his usual stand-and-deliver style again:—'I am now directed to inform you that, unless the last instalment with arrears of interest is remitted me by next quarter-day, my clients will regretfully feel themselves compelled to foreclose.'"

He laid down the letter with a little lifting of his brows. "I really think they mean it at last, and their mortgage covers most of the Dell, and the leys on Stapleton's holding. I suppose it is no use asking if you could dispense with your next allowance."

Jimmy Denham laughed, though he was quite aware that the occasion was serious enough. "I'm afraid not, sir. In fact, as I had regretfully to admit, unless I can raise two hundred pounds in addition to it before my leave runs out, I shall probably have to send in my papers. Fortunately, I think I can manage it."

He spoke quite frankly, and there was nothing in the attitude of either to suggest that one was a father embarrassed by financial difficulties and the other a spendthrift son. Indeed, they faced each other as comrades, one could almost have said confederates, for in spite of their shortcomings, which were somewhat plentiful, the Denhams at least recognised the family bond, standing by one another in everything.

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"In that case," said Branscombe Denham, "the allowance must stand, though I don't know at present where it is to come from. The other affair is more difficult. In fact, unless we face it resolutely it might become serious."

"So one would imagine," said Jimmy, reflectively. "The Dell is the best farm we have, and to let those fellows have it would make things a little too plain to everybody. Besides, it's splitting up the property. To a certain extent, of course, we are living upon our credit."

Branscombe Denham nodded, though there was a curious look in his pale blue eyes as he fixed them on his son.

"I'm rather afraid you don't quite grasp the point," he said. "You see, Lancelly's man holds a mortgage on most of the Dell; but, as you, perhaps, remember, Lennox lent me a couple of thousand, with the plough-land in the bottom as security. He did it as a friend, and didn't worry much about his papers, while I'm not sure I remembered to mention Lancelly's bond to him, so there is what one might call a certain overlapping of the mortgages. Then I found it necessary to realise a little on the oaks and beeches at Arkil bank."

Jimmy's face grew grave. "I rather fancy they brought you in a good deal. They were unusually good trees. You sold the timber after you raised the money on the mortgages?"

"I did. That is just the point of it. I needn't say that I had then a scheme of retrenchment in my mind which would provide a kind of sinking fund to meet the interest, and in due time extinguish the loan, in which case the question of the timber would, naturally, never have been raised. Unfortunately, the fall in rents and one or two other matters—rendered it unworkable."

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Jimmy made a gesture of comprehending sympathy. "I'm afraid it would look rather bad, sir, if it came out. Lancely's man might make a good deal of trouble if he wants his timber and finds it isn't there, to say nothing of what Lennox, who, it seems, has a claim on it as well, might do. Still, no doubt, you did what you could, sir, and I'm rather afraid it was one or two of my little extravagances that put some of the pressure on you. I needn't say that if there is anything I can do, down to cutting the service—or bearing part of the responsibility——"

"Thanks," said Denham, as if he meant it. "You were not very extravagant, Jimmy, as young men go, and we have hitherto, at least, always stood by each other. Still, I'm not sure that it's my son I can count on now."

"Ah," and Jimmy's voice was a trifle sharper. "I'm afraid I never liked that notion, sir. I think I've mentioned it. There's a good deal of the beast in Aylmer. Has he said anything?"

A curious look crept into Denham's face, and it suggested repugnance as well as anxiety. "He came to me yesterday, and his ideas of a settlement were liberal. I pointed out a few of my difficulties to him, and he mentioned rather tastefully that he fancied they could be got over if he had my good will in the other matter. In fact, he left me with the impression that the mortgage bonds would be handed Carrie after the wedding."

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Jimmy Denham's face appeared a trifle flushed, though he was considered a rather hard case by a certain officers' mess.

"I don't like it, sir," he said again. "I can't claim to be very particular, but that man is rather too much for me."

"Then have you any proposition to make?"

Jimmy sat still for at least a minute, apparently lost in thought, which was in his case a very unusual thing.

"The whole affair is a little unpleasant, and I think you won't mind my saying that much. Still, it's evident that we have to face the circumstances, and I scarcely think Carrie will flinch when she understands the necessity. There might, however, be a more suitable man than Aylmer. In fact, I almost think I know of one."

"The Canadian?"

"Exactly. Anyway, the man is wholesome, which is more than anybody could say of Aylmer, and I rather fancy he will be a person of considerable importance by-and-bye, in his own country. If, as I suppose, you haven't given Aylmer a definite answer yet, I might suggest that you tell him he must make his own running, and leave the rest to me. Though she's not fond of any of us but Carrie, I've no doubt that Eveline Annersly would stand by me."

There was silence again for almost a minute, and then Denham sighed.

"Well," he said, with a little gesture, "you will remember that there is not very much time left. In the meanwhile aren't you keeping the rest of them waiting?"

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Jimmy went out, and none of the three men he drove to the Garberry moor could have suspected that he had a single care. They would certainly not have believed, had he told them, that he was, for once, sincerely disgusted with himself as well as his father, and troubled with a very unusual sense of shame. There was courage of a kind in the Denhams, and they could, at least, hide their feelings very well. He inspired the rest with good-humour and shot rather better than he generally did, but he had grown grave again when he had an interview with Mrs. Annersly shortly before dinner that evening. She listened to him with a little frown.

"Jimmy," she said, "you are almost as deficient in estimable qualities as your father is."

"Well," said Jimmy humbly, "I know I am, but you might leave the governor out. I think he is a little older than you are—and he is my father. Anyway, though you mightn't believe it, I feel a trifle sick when I think of Aylmer."

"What do you expect from me?"

Jimmy smiled. "Not a great deal. Only a persistence in your original policy. I have rather a fancy that you and I have had the same thing in our minds."

Mrs. Annersly looked thoughtful. "If it must be one or the other, I'll do what I can. In fact, I don't mind admitting that, seeing what it would probably come to, I have, as you surmise, had the affair in hand already. Still, it was not to make things easier for either you or your father."

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CHAPTER IV

LELAND MAKES THE PLUNGE

There was for the first time a chill of frost in the air, so none of the guests at Barrock-holme thought of lounging on the terrace after dinner. Some were in Denham's gun-room, some were playing cards, and only a few were left in the big drawing-room where Carrie sat at the piano. Leland stood beside her to turn the music over, a duty which was new to him and indifferently fulfilled. He had no very clear notion then or afterwards what she was singing. Still, her voice, which was indubitably good, awakened a little thrill in him. Her proximity had also an exhilarating effect, and he was lost in a whirl of sensations he could not analyse as he looked down on the cold face with its crown of dusky hair and saw the gleam of ivory shoulders. This was a man who had usually so much to do that it left him little time to dissect and classify his emotions.

He did not think he was in love with Carrie Denham, so far as his ideas on that subject went; but, until he had come to England, the society of a woman of her description was an unknown thing to him. Her physical beauty appealed to him, her cold, reposeful sincerity and pride of station had made an even stronger impression, and now he was sensible of a vague admiration and compassion for her. He felt, too, a feeling of awkwardness in her presence, realising at the same time that there was nothing to warrant it.

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He did not look awkward in the least. His bronze face was quiet, his grave, brown eyes were steady, and, though he was quite unconscious of it, the pose he had fallen into effectively displayed the spare symmetry of his muscular figure. There was also upon him the stamp of the silent strength and vigour that comes of a clean life spent in wide spaces out in the wind and sun. He did not know that several pairs of eyes were watching him with approval, and that the owner of one of them smiled in a fashion which suggested satisfaction as she glanced towards Aylmer. The fleshy gentleman sat not very far away, and Leland fancied that his own presence at the piano was justified when he looked in that direction. There was that in his nature which prompted him to offer protection to any one who needed it, and he felt it was not fitting that such a man as Aylmer should stand at Carrie Denham's side. He had been sensible of this before, but the feeling was unusually strong that night. At last the music stopped, and she looked up at him with her curious little smile.

"Thank you," she said; and the man felt his blood stir, for he fancied she understood what had brought him there. Still, shrewd in his own way as he was, he was strangely deceived in supposing that nobody except the girl and himself had grasped his purpose, or that he would have been able to carry it out at all without the concurrence of one, at least, of those who watched him. Leland had grappled with adverse seasons, and held his own against hard and clever men, but he had not as yet had cultured Englishwomen for his enemies or partisans.

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He turned away when Carrie Denham rose, and, moving about the room, found himself presently near Mrs. Annersly, who was sitting alone just then on a divan with a big, partly-folded screen on one hand of her. It cut that nook off from the observation of most of the rest, as she was probably aware when she settled herself there; but, when she indicated the vacant place at her side, it never occurred to Leland that she had been lying in wait for him.

"You did that very cleverly. I mean when you opened the piano first," she said. "I never suspected you of being a diplomatist. One could almost fancy that Carrie was grateful, too."

Leland was in no way flattered, since all he had done was to reach the piano in advance of Aylmer, who was a trifle heavy on his feet. In fact, he was slightly disconcerted, though he did not show it.

"Well," he said frankly, "it was either Aylmer or I."

His companion looked at him in a rather strange fashion. "Exactly!" she said. "It was either you or Aylmer, and, perhaps, it was natural that Carrie should prefer you."

Leland glanced across the big room, towards where Aylmer was sitting, and was once more sensible of dislike and repulsion. The man did not look well in evening dress. It made his flabby heaviness of flesh too apparent, and the sharply contrasted black and white emphasised the florid colouring of his broad, sensual face. He was just then regarding Carrie Denham out of narrow slits of eyes, priggish eyes, Leland called them to himself, and there was the easily recognisable stamp of grossness and indulgence upon him. The Westerner himself was hard and somewhat spare, a man whose body had been toughened by strenuous labour and held in due subjection by an unbending will. Mrs. Annersly noticed the clearness of his steady eyes and the clean transparency of his bronzed skin. As a man, he was, she decided, certainly to be preferred to Aylmer, and perhaps the more so because there was a side of his nature which as yet, it was evident, had scarcely been awakened. She was glad that the drawing-room was large and the place where they sat secluded, because there was a notion with which she desired to inspire him. She had already gone a certain distance in that direction, and now it was time to go a little further. She could see that her last speech had had some effect.

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"Madam," he said, with his usual directness, "I wonder what you mean by that."

"It ought to be evident," said the lady, with a little smile. "If everybody's suppositions are correct,

I really think Carrie will have enough of Aylmer by-and-bye. There is no reason why she should commence the surfeit now."

"Then if she feels as you suggest she does, why in the name of wonder should she marry him?"

"There are family reasons. Jimmy and his family are, I fear, in difficulties again, and it will be the privilege of Carrie's husband to extricate them. I believe I told you as much before, though you do not seem to have remembered it."

A slightly darker tinge of colour crept into Leland's cheek. "As a matter of fact, madam, the thing has been worrying me ever since you did. A marriage of that kind is rather more than any one with a sense of the fitness of things could quietly contemplate." [Pg 40]

"Still"—and Mrs. Annersly looked at him steadily—"the difficulty is that I am afraid there is nothing you or I could do to prevent it."

Leland was a trifle startled. He could almost fancy that she expected a disclaimer from him, and meant to suggest that, if he wished it, he might find a way where she had failed. He did not know how she had conveyed this impression, and, as he could not be sure that she had desired to do so, he sat in silence until she abruptly changed the subject. With a man of this description there was no necessity for being unduly artistic; the one thing was to get the notion into his mind.

"When are you going back?" she said.

"I don't quite know. In a month or so. Of course, I ought to be there now; but it is the first time I have been away since I came home from Montreal, and it will probably be a long while before I take a rest again. As it is, my being away this harvest will probably cost me a good deal."

"It must be lonely on the prairie, especially in the winter."

Leland smiled. "It is. Once we haul the grain in, there is very little one can do, with a foot of snow upon the ground and the thermometer at forty below. There's just Prospect and its birch bluff in the midst of the big white circle with the sledge-trails running out from it straight to the horizon. Not a house, not a beast, or any sign of life about." [Pg 41]

He stopped, and made a little gesture. "Of course, there are big hotels where one could meet pleasant people, as well as operas and theatres, at Winnipeg, and one could get there in two days on the cars. I dare say I could manage a trip to Montreal or New York occasionally too, and we have a few well-educated people from the East on the prairie not more than twenty miles away; but, since I have nobody to go with, going away from home doesn't appeal to me, so I spend the long night sitting beside the stove with the cedar shingles crackling over me in the cold. Now and then I read, and when I don't there is plenty to think about in planning out the next year's campaign."

"Has it never occurred to you that it would be a good deal more pleasant if you were married?"

"As a matter of fact it has, but I put the notion away from me. For one thing, I remember my mother, and, if ever I married, it would have to be somebody grave and sweet and dainty like her. She was a well brought-up Englishwoman, and, perhaps, she lived long enough to spoil me. She showed me what a wife could be, and it's scarcely likely there are many women of her kind who would ever care for a prairie farmer who knows very little about anything but wheat and cattle."

"You seem almost unreasonably sure of that," said Mrs. Annersly.

Leland laughed. "Madam," he said, "would you go out there to the prairie and trust yourself alone to such a man as I am?"

The little faded lady's eyes twinkled, and in the tones of her reply there was something which suggested confidence in her companion. [Pg 42]

"I scarcely suppose you mean me to consider that seriously?" she said. "Still, if I were twenty years younger I almost think I would, and, what is more, I scarcely fancy I should be sorry. That is, at least, if you were willing to take me to Winnipeg or Montreal now and then, and bring out any friends I might make there to stay with me. We, however, needn't concern ourselves with that question, since you certainly don't want me. The point is that one could fancy there are English girls of the kind you mention who would be willing to venture as far as I would. Still, you would have to bestir yourself, and make it evident that you wanted one in particular to go out with you. You could hardly expect anybody to suggest it to you."

Leland was thoughtful, for Eveline Annersly had done her work successfully. She had first inspired him with a strong man's pity for Carrie Denham, and awakened in him an undefined, chivalrous desire to protect her, whilst now she had gone a little further, and suggested that there was, perhaps, a way in which he could do so. He sat quite still for a moment or two. The great bare room at Prospect, with its uncovered walls and floor, and the big stove in the midst of it, rose up before his fancy. Then he saw it changed and cosy, filled to suit a woman's artistic taste with the things he cared little for, but which his wealth could buy for the gracious presence sitting there beside him. Then there would be something to look forward to as he floundered home from the railroad down the beaten sledge-trail beside his jaded team, or swept up in his sleigh out of the white waste, stiff with frost. It was an alluring picture in its way, but, after all, material comforts had not appealed to him greatly, and while he sat silent by Eveline Annersly's side the visions carried him further. [Pg 43]

There were, he knew, doors that would be opened to him willingly in Winnipeg. He could conceive himself becoming a man of mark in the prairie city, and lonely Prospect filled in the shooting season with guests whose names were famous in the West. Hitherto he had been a mere grower of wheat, but he had a quiet faith in his capabilities, and fancied there was no reason why, with a clever wife to help him, he should not become famous too, an influence in the new land whose future he and others were laboriously building up. So far, it was only his reason the fancies appealed to, but, as he glanced across the room towards where Carrie Denham sat, he was conscious of a stirring of his blood. She was very alluring, with her reposeful stateliness, dark eyes that shone with light when she smiled, and dark hair that emphasised the clear ivory tinting of the patrician face beneath it. The pity he felt for her was becoming lost in a quickening admiration.

"Still," he said, "what you suggest is a trifle difficult to believe. If wheat keeps its value, my life, which is now in some ways a hard and lonely one, might be changed—it is my personality that presents the difficulty. There is so much you set value on that I know nothing about, and one could scarcely expect an English girl with any refinement to be attracted by a plain Western farmer."

Mrs. Annersly smiled at him. "Well," she said, "I believe I told you I had no great fault to find with you, and I don't believe the rising generation is more fastidious than my own. In fact, it wouldn't be difficult to persuade oneself of the contrary. To be frank, I really don't think you need be lonely any longer, unless, of course, you prefer it."

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Again Leland did not answer her. He sat looking straight in front of him with a faint glow in his eyes and his lips firmly set, while an unreasoning impulse seized him, and swept him away as he saw Aylmer approach Carrie Denham's chair. Perhaps Eveline Annersly guessed part, at least, of what was in his mind, for she raised her eyes a moment and glanced at Jimmy Denham, who was talking to a young girl some distance away. Jimmy was a young man of considerable intelligence, and though he made no sign, he knew that he was wanted. A minute or two later he made his way indirectly and leisurely across the room, and drawing out a chair sat down near Leland.

"You two look as if you had been discussing something important," he said. "Has he been persuading you to go out and preside over Prospect, Aunt Eveline?"

Mrs. Annersly smiled. "No," she said; "he naturally wants a younger and more attractive person, but I understand is rather afraid that nobody of the kind would look at him. I have been trying to show him that he is mistaken."

"Of course!" said Jimmy. "He doesn't quite grasp things yet. There are few sensible girls who would say no to a man with his income. In fact, I'd feel reasonably sure of getting an heiress if I had a third of it."

He stopped with a short laugh, looking straight at Leland with something that suggested a definite meaning in his pale blue eyes. "Anyway, there's no reason why you shouldn't get any one you have seen at Barrock-holme, provided, of course, that the lady in question is in other respects pleased with you."

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Leland closed his lips a little tighter, for it was borne in upon him that Jimmy Denham had not spoken without a purpose, and he realised that he might be listened to if he craved permission to offer himself as a suitor for his sister's hand. Jimmy, however, was too adroit to dwell upon the subject, and, changing it abruptly, led Leland into a discussion of hammerless guns. Still, both he and Eveline Annersly realised that he had said enough, which in most cases is a good deal better than too much. As a matter of fact, his words had stirred Leland to the rashest plunge he had ever made in his life, though during most of it he had usually taken the boldest course, holding his wheat on a falling market and sowing in times of black depression when the prudent held their hand.

On the next morning he had an interview with Branscombe Denham in the library, which left him with a very unpleasant impression. In fact, the silence he forced himself to maintain hurt him, and he felt it would have been a vast relief to tell the fastidious, immaculately dressed gentleman precisely what he thought of him. Having on certain delicately implied conditions secured his goodwill, Leland set about the prosecution of his suit with a directness and singleness of purpose that was a matter of delight to those who watched his proceedings. He, however, was quite oblivious of their amusement. He knew what he wanted, and it did not matter in the least that others should guess it, too, but, apart from his obvious directness, he played the suitor with a grave, old-fashioned gallantry and deference that became him. In fact, since it was by no means what they expected from him, they wondered how he came to have it. Though Leland himself could not have told them its source, it had been his practice in the long nights, when Prospect lay silent under the Arctic frost, to read and ponder over the best of the early Victorian novelists. His mother had been a woman of taste, and he had, perhaps, unconsciously acquired from the books she had left him some of the mannerisms of a more punctilious time.

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It was, in any case, promptly evident to everybody that Aylmer was outclassed. Leland's wooing was, no doubt, a trifle ceremonious, but Aylmer's savoured too much of the freedom of the barroom and music-halls. There was more than one maiden at Barrock-holme who felt that it was a pity she had not accorded a little judicious encouragement to the quiet, bronze-faced Canadian, who it now transpired had large possessions. After all, his stilted courtesy was attractive in its way and had in it the interest of an entirely new sensation.

Nobody, however, knew exactly what Carrie Denham thought of it, although it was evident that she preferred him to Aylmer. When at last he spoke his mind to her, she listened gravely with a slightly flushed face and a thoughtful look in her eyes.

"If you are wise," she said quietly, "you will not press me for an answer now. You can wait, at least, until this time to-morrow. Then I shall be outside on the steps of the terrace."

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It was not very encouraging, but Leland made her a little inclination.

"If that is your wish, I must try to be patient," he said.

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CHAPTER V

NO ESCAPE

It was towards the middle of the next afternoon when Carrie Denham leaned upon the rails of the little path outside the grey walls of the garden at Barrock-holme. From where she stood she could see the narrower and unprotected way along which she had ventured with Leland a few weeks earlier, and she could not help remembering his quiet glance of interrogation when he had come upon it suddenly. She and Jimmy had often crossed that somewhat perilous ledge in their younger days, the more often, in fact, because it had been forbidden to them. Though it was, of course, new to Leland, he had displayed no hesitation when once she had made her wishes plain. This had pleased her at the time, since it suggested that he understood her resolution was equal to his own; but now she brushed the recollection aside, for just then she felt she almost hated him.

Close by, a narrow flight of steps hewn out of the dripping rock led down into the ravine, and she watched with a curious sense of strained expectancy the path which wound among the silvery birches from the foot of them to the mossy stepping-stones round which the Barrock flashed. She knew this was unwise, and that she could not escape from what lay before her, but hope dies hard when one is young, and there was still lurking at the back of her mind a faint belief that after all something might happen to stave off the impending disaster. If so, it would be only fitting that it should result from the efforts of the man in whom she had once had faith and confidence, though neither now was so strong as it had been.

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A drowsy quietness brooded over Barrock-holme. The men were away shooting, and the women had driven to inspect some relics of the Roman occupation among the fells. She herself had made excuses for remaining behind.

There was not a movement among the birch leaves still hanging here and there, flecks of pale gold among the lace-like twigs beneath her, and the murmur of the gently swirling water emphasised the silence of the hollow. She could hear a squirrel shaking the beech-mast down, and the patter of the falling nuts rose sharply distinct from the thin carpet of yellow leaves. Then she felt her heart beat as the sound of footsteps reached her ears. The man she had once believed in was coming, and, if there was any way out of the difficulties that threatened her, it was his part to find it.

He came up the rude steps hastily, a well-favoured young man of her own world, and almost her own age, which she felt was in some ways unfortunate then. As he seized both her hands, with a little resolute movement she drew them away from him.

"No," she said a trifle sharply. "As I told you last time, that is all done with now. It was a little weak of me to see you, and you must not come here again."

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The colour faded in the young man's face, and he clenched his hands spasmodically.

"Oh!" he said, with a catch in his breath, "you can't mean it, Carrie. In spite of what you told me, I had been trying to believe the thing was out of the question."

There was pain in Carrie Denham's face, and a little bitter smile flickered into her eyes.

"The thing one shrinks from most is generally the one that happens—unless one does something to make it impossible," she said.

The man reddened, for, though he was pleasant to look at, a stalwart, open-faced Englishman, he was very young, and it was, perhaps, not his fault that there was a lack of stiffness in his composition. He was not one to grapple resolutely with an emergency, and Carrie Denham, who had once looked up to him, realised it then.

"What could I do—what could anybody in my place do?" he said, with a little gesture that suggested desperation. "Stanley Crossthwaite is only sixty, and may live another twenty years. While he does, I'm something between his head keeper and a pensioner."

"Isn't it a pity you didn't think of that earlier?"

The man made as though he would have seized her hands again, but she drew back from him with a slight shiver of hopelessness running through her.

"You can't blame me," he said. "Who could help falling in love with you? There was a time when I think you loved me, too."

Carrie watched him with a quietness at which she herself marvelled. She had, at least, fancied she felt for him what he had protested he felt for her, but now there was a stirring of contempt in her. Her reason recognised that he was right, and there was nothing he could do; but, for all that, he had been her last faint hope, and he had failed her. [Pg 51]

"There is nothing to be gained by talking of that now," she said quietly.

The man, who did not answer her, leaned upon the rails, gazing down into the ravine with his face awry, until at last he looked up again.

"It's not that awful brute Aylmer?" he said hoarsely.

"No. I could not have brought myself to that."

"The farmer fellow? It's horrible, anyway, but I suppose one couldn't blame you—they, your father and Jimmy, made you."

He straightened himself suddenly and moved along the path a pace or two. "It's an abominable thing that you should be driven to such a sacrifice, but you shall not make it. Can't you understand? It's out of the question. You can't make it. Is there nothing you can do?"

The girl's face was colourless, and her lips were trembling, but her eyes were hard, for her contempt was growing stronger now. The man had asked her the question to which it seemed fitting that he alone should find an answer. She did not know what she had expected from him, and, since she had decided that the sacrifice must be made, she recognised that there was, in fact, nothing she could expect; but her strength had almost failed her. Had he suggested a desperate remedy, and insisted on it masterfully, she might have fled with him. Only it would have been necessary for him to compel her with an overwhelming forcefulness that was stronger than her will, and that was apparently too much to ask of him. [Pg 52]

"No," she said, with a quietness that was born of despair, "there is nothing. Fate is too strong for us, Reggie, and you must go back now. It would have been better had I never promised that I would see you. I should not have done it, but I wanted you to understand that I couldn't help myself."

She held out a hand to him, and the man flushed as he seized it. Then he drew her towards him, but the girl shook him off with a strength that seemed equal to his own, and, though he scarcely saw her move, in another moment she stood a yard or two away from him. There was a spot of crimson in her cheek, and she was gasping a little.

"Go now!" she said, and her voice had a faintly grating ring. "Since you cannot help me, you shall, at least, not make it harder than I can bear."

He stood looking at her, slightly bewildered, irresolute, and half-ashamed, though he did not quite realise for the moment why he should feel so. Then, with a despairing gesture, he went down the steps without a word. Whilst Carrie Denham still leaned dejectedly on the terrace railing, Eveline Annersly, coming through the archway, caught a glimpse of a shadowy figure moving off through the trees.

"Were you wise?" she asked the girl. "One has to be circumspect, you know."

Carrie laughed bitterly.

"I do not think there was any great risk. It is a very long while since young Lochinvar swam the Esk at Netherby. In fact, unless men have changed with the times, it is difficult to believe that he ever did." [Pg 53]

Mrs. Annersly glanced at her shrewdly, for she fancied she understood.

"I'm not sure they have," she said. "There was a gentleman in the ballad who said nothing at all, and presumably did nothing, too; but I don't know that I'm so very sorry for you. Reggie Urmston is a nice boy, but I imagine that is about all that could be said of him."

She stopped a moment, and looked at the girl with a little twinkle in her eyes. "I almost think, my dear, that if you had shown the Canadian half the favour you have wasted on Reggie, he would, even in these degenerate days, have carried you off, in spite of all the Denhams could do to prevent him."

Then for the first time Carrie Denham flushed crimson as she heard the thought she had not permitted herself to put into words. The impression sank in, and she afterwards recalled it. She, however, said nothing in comment, and the two went back silently through the archway to the lawn.

The rest of the afternoon seemed very long to Carrie; but it dragged itself away, and at last she slipped out of the house as the still night was closing down. A full moon had just lifted itself above the ridge of moor. As she flitted along the terrace, the pale, silvery light was creeping

across the old grey house. It rose above her, a pile of rudely hewn and weathered stone, not beautiful, for time itself could not make it that with its creeping mosses, houseleek, and lichens, but stamped with a certain rugged stateliness, and the girl, who had much else to think of, felt its influence.

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The pride of family was strong in her, and she remembered what kind of men those were who had built themselves that home in the days of feud and foray. They, at least, had not shrunk from the harder things of life, and she, who sprang from them, could emulate their courage. It seemed that Barrock-holme demanded a sacrifice, and she must make it. Then a little flush crept to her face as she remembered the part her father and Jimmy played. It was a degenerate and paltry one, to which she felt the very stranger to whom they were willing to sell her would never have stooped. He was not of her world, a man, so far as she knew, of low degree, one who had held the plough; but there were, at least, signs of strength and pride in him.

She stopped for just a moment with a little catching of her breath as she saw him, a dim figure in the shadow of the firs beyond the wall that lay in sharp, black outline upon the dewy lawn. Then she went on again, nerving herself for what must be borne. When he had reached the foot of the terrace steps, he stood waiting her there with his hat in his hand. It was not exactly what Jimmy Denham or even Reggie Urmston would have done in a similar case, but this quaint Westerner had seen fit to make use of the formal courtesy of sixty years ago, and, what was most curious, farmer as he was, it did not appear ridiculous in him.

"It was," he said, "very good of you to come, though I was 'most afraid to hope that you would keep your promise."

"Wouldn't such a thing imply an obligation?"

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"Yes"—and Leland made a little gesture—"I think it would with you. Still, you see, the fact that you made that promise was in one way an astonishing thing to me."

He stopped, and stood for a moment or two regarding her gravely, and the girl noticed that he was one who could be silent without awkwardness. It also seemed to her that he had made the opening moves rather gracefully.

"Well," he said at length, "I had the honour of making you an offer last night."

The girl found something reassuring in his lack of embarrassment and his dispassionate tone. She felt that the man was not in love with her, and that promised to make things a good deal easier. She was also relieved to find that she was mistress of herself.

"It was, perhaps, rather an unusual thing for me to ask you to meet me here, but I fancied we should be quite alone," she said. "There is something to be said."

"Yes," said Leland gravely. "That is quite natural. I am all attention."

"Then will you tell me candidly why you wish to marry me."

The moonlight showed the faint twinkle in Leland's eyes, as he made her one of his queer little bows.

"I wonder," he said, "do you ever look into your mirror?"

"Pshaw!" said the girl. "That is, after all, a very indifferent reason. I want the real one."

Leland stood very straight now, looking at her steadily, but it was evident that he was somewhat perplexed. Accustomed as he was to being frank with himself, he did not quite know why he wanted to marry her then. A few weeks earlier he had been swayed by no more than an unreasoning desire to save her from Aylmer, but he was by no means sure that was all now. She stood full in the moonlight with the fleecy wrap about her shoulders, intensifying the duskiness of her eyes and hair, and the long light dress suggesting the sweeping lines of a beautifully-moulded figure, and her freshness and beauty stirred his depths. The faint trace of imperiousness in her pose, and the unfaltering gaze of her dark eyes, which were as steady as his own, had an effect that was stronger still, for her courage and composure appealed most to him. In the meanwhile she was, however, apparently awaiting an answer, and, though he was usually candid, nothing would have induced him to mention his original reason.

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"Well," he said, "I think I have told you that you are the most beautiful woman I have ever, at least, spoken to, but that, though it goes some distance, isn't quite everything. You've got grit and fibre that are worth more than looks. I am a lonely man with big fancies of my own, and, with you beside me to teach me what I do not know, I think I could make my mark in my own country."

"You have nothing more to urge?"

Leland made a little gesture.

"My dear, I think you would find me kind to you."

If the issue had been less serious, Carrie Denham could have laughed. His frankness and the absence of any sign of ardour or impassioned protest were, she fancied, under the circumstances, somewhat unusual, but that was, after all, a matter of relief to her. She was willing to marry him, but she meant to teach him to keep his distance afterwards, which would naturally be more difficult to do in the case of a man in love with her. Then he fixed his gaze on her again.

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"I almost fancy it's my turn now," he said. "I want the answer to a question I asked you last night. Will you come back to Prospect with me, as my wife?"

Carrie Denham felt her cheeks burn, for she had to make him understand, and it was harder than she had imagined.

"Yes," she said simply; "on conditions. One must be honest, and I could not make a bargain with you—afterwards—you can draw back now. I think you know that I do not love you—and I have nothing to give you except my fellowship. Still, as you do not love me, you will, perhaps, be content with that."

The moonlight showed that Leland started slightly, and the darker colour in his bronzed face, but he made her a little deferential gesture. Then he looked up again, straightening himself, with the glint in his eyes she had now and then seen there before.

"My dear," he said, "you shall do 'most everything you like; but, when you say that I do not love you, I am not sure that you are right."

"Still," said the girl sharply, "I, at least, know what I feel myself, and I have tried to tell you that you must not expect too much from me."

Leland, stooping, caught her hand and held it fast.

"It's a bargain," he said. "You shall be your own mistress in every way, and your wishes will be quite enough for me; but I almost think that you will love me, too, some day. I shall try to find how to make you, and I have never been quite beaten yet in anything I undertook."

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He saw the look of shrinking in her face, and, though he had not expected it, a little thrill of pain ran through him. Then he raised the hand he held, and, stooping, touched it with his lips before he laid it on his arm. As they went up the steps together, he looked down on her again.

"In the meanwhile, I will try to do nothing that could make you sorry you married me; and you have only to tell me when anything does not please you."

He left her at the entrance to the hall, while he went in search of Branscombe Denham, and, as it happened, saw very little of her during the rest of the evening. It was late that night when the girl related to Eveline Annersly a part of what had passed. The faded, merry little woman, her aunt and only confidante, smiled as she listened.

"You probably know your own affairs best, but I can't help wondering if you were wise in giving that man to understand that you didn't care in the least for him," she said.

"Why?" said Carrie.

"Because it is just possible that you may be sorry for it by-and-bye. As it is, I don't think there is any great necessity for pitying you. If it had been Aylmer, it would have been a different matter."

The girl looked at her with lifted brows.

"Do you suppose I should ever care for a man like that one?"

"Well," said her companion reflectively, "he seems to me a much superior man to Reggie. Quite apart from that, I never could discover any particular reason for the belief the Denhams seem to have that they are set apart from the rest of humanity. If there were any, I should know it, since I'm one of them myself, you see. Henry Annersly, with all his shortcomings—and he naturally had them—was a much better man than Jimmy will ever be. In any case, you would have had to marry somebody; and, if I had been your mother, I would have shaken you for trying to fancy yourself in love with Reggie."

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Carrie Denham flushed crimson, and her brows straightened ominously, but she restrained herself, and laughed, a little bitter laugh.

"Well," she said, "I suppose I did, and I had my chances in two Town seasons. Perhaps I was unreasonably fastidious, but I was—if it wasn't more than that—fond of Reggie, and, at least, I am willing to bear the cost of my foolishness now."

Mrs. Annersly rose, and, after looking down on her a moment, stooped and kissed her.

"Still," she said, "it wouldn't be quite honest to expect your husband to bear it too. Good-night, and try to think well of him. I almost fancy he deserves it."

She went out smiling, but, when the door had closed, her face grew grave again.

"I wonder if that man will have reason to hate me for what I have done," she said.

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CHAPTER VI

THE PRAIRIE

Two long whistles came ringing up the track.

Carrie Leland rose unsteadily in the big overheated car and struggled into the furs which had been one of her husband's gifts to her. She had never worn furs of that kind before, and, indeed, had never seen anything quite like them in her friends' possession; but, while that had naturally been a cause of satisfaction, it was, nevertheless, with a vague repugnance she put them on. They were one of the visible tokens that in the most sordid sense of the word she belonged to him. The man had not won her favour. In fact, he had made no great pretence of seeking it, for which, so far as that went, she was grateful; but he had evidently carried out his part of the bargain, and now she was part of his property, acquired by purchase. The recognition of it carried with it an almost intolerable sting, though hitherto—and it was just a fortnight since her wedding—she had not felt it quite so keenly. He had not been exacting, and it had been comparatively easy to keep him at due distance on board the big mail-boat and in the crowded train, but she realised it would be different, now they were almost home.

In the meanwhile the great train was slowing down, and, when the clanging of the locomotive bell came back to her, she went out through the vestibule and leant on the platform-rails. Two huge wooden buildings, grain elevators, she supposed, with lines of sledges beneath them, flitted by. It was with a shiver she glanced at the little wooden town. It rose abruptly from the prairie, without sign of tree or garden to relieve its ugliness, an unsightly jumble of wooden houses in the midst of a vast white plain, which stretched gleaming to the far horizon, with not even a willow bluff to relieve its desolation. She set her lips tight as the cars ran slowly into the station. It consisted apparently of a stock-yard, a towering water-tank, and a weatherbeaten shed half-buried in snow, and was, as usual when the trains came in, crowded with men, who looked uncouth and shapeless in dilapidated skin-coats, and had hard faces, almost blackened by exposure to the frost. It was all strange and unfamiliar. She had not a friend in that grim, desolate land, and she felt the physical discomfort almost a relief by way of distraction from her overpowering sense of loneliness when the bitter cold struck through her with the keenness of steel.

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Then the cars stopped, and her husband, who swung her down into the dusty snow beside the track, was forthwith surrounded by the crowd. Men with the snow-dust sprinkled like flour upon their shaggy furs clustered about him, and their harsh, drawling voices grated on her ears. They made it evident that he was one of them, for they greeted him with rude friendliness as "Charley". That was another shock to her prejudices. Leland, however, waved them aside, and they fell back a pace or two, gazing at her with unemotional inquiry in their eyes, until he laid his hand upon her arm.

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"I guess you're going to be astonished," he said. "My wife, boys!"

Then the big fur caps came off, while the men with the hard brown faces clustered thicker about the pair, and awkwardly held out mittened hands. They were most of them speaking, and, though it was difficult to catch all they said, she heard from those at the back odd snatches which did not please her.

"Why didn't you let us know, and we'd have turned out the band? . . . It's a great country you have come to, ma'am. . . . She's a daisy. . . . Where'd he get her from? . . . You've married the whitest man on the prairie, Mrs. Leland. . . . Some tone about that one."

A little red spot burned in Carrie Leland's cheeks. She hovered between anger and humiliation. Social distinctions counted for much in the land of her birth, and it seemed to her that the man she had married might have spared her this vulgarity. It might have been different had she loved him, for she would then, perhaps, have found pleasure in his evident popularity; but, as it was, she felt merely the indignity of being exposed to the gaze and comments of these ox-drivers or ploughmen, as she took them to be. That she was apparently expected to shake hands with them struck her as ridiculous. The ovation, however, died away, and there was for a moment an uncomfortable silence, during which the crowd gazed at the cold, beautiful woman who regarded them with unsympathetic eyes, until her husband touched her arm again.

"Won't you say just a word to them? They mean to be kind," he said.

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Carrie made no response. She felt she could not have done so had she wished, and Leland turned to the men again. "Mrs. Leland doesn't feel quite equal to thanking you, boys," he said. "She has just come off a long journey and is feeling a little strange."

The men murmured good-humouredly. One of them pushed his way through the crowd and shook hands with Leland.

"We sent your wheat on to Winnipeg, as you cabled, and your people have brought us another forty sledge-loads in," he said. "We're rather tightly fixed for room, and want to know if you're going to send much more along. No doubt you know wheat is two cents down."

"I do," said Leland drily. "Still, in the meanwhile I have got to sell."

The man appeared a little astonished, but he made a sign of comprehension. "Well," he said, "if you could have held back a month or two, it might have been better. They've been rushing a good deal on to the markets lately, but I guess you'll want to straighten up after your trip to the old country. Your sleigh's ready, as you wired."

Leland, who, as she noticed, seemed desirous of changing the subject, turned to his wife.

"Would you like some tea, or anything of that kind?" he said. "If not, we had better start at once. It's forty miles to Prospect, and there's not much of the afternoon left. Still, of course, if you prefer it, they might fix you up a fairly decent room at the hotel to-night."

Carrie glanced at the little desolate town. It appeared uninviting enough, but when she spoke the words seemed to stick in her throat.

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"No," she said; "I would sooner go—home."

Leland said something to the man beside him, and then led Carrie into a very dirty wooden room with a big stove in the midst of it, after which he left her to watch, with a sinking heart, the departing train clatter out into the darkness.

He came back transformed—with a battered fur cap hiding most of his face, in a very big and somewhat tattered fur coat. With a fresh shock of dismay, she noticed that he now looked very much as the others did. In another minute he had lifted her into the sleigh and wrapped the big robes about her. Then he shook the reins and they were whirled away down the long smear of trail that led straight off to the horizon.

It was beaten hard, the team were fresh and fast, and for a while the girl felt the exhilaration of the swift rush through nipping air. The desolate town faded behind her; a grey blur that lifted itself out of the horizon, and was a big birch bluff, came flitting back to her; there was deep stillness, only intensified by the screech of runners and the soft drumming of hoofs. A vast sweep of fleckless azure overhung the glistening plain below. It was not all white, however, for there were shades of grey and dusky purple in the hollows, and the trail was a wavy riband that rose and fell in varying blue. It was beautiful in its own way, and the stinging air stirred her blood like wine. That was for an hour or so; but when the sun dipped, a red, copper ball, amidst a frosty haze, and the blues and greys crept wide across the whiteness of the plain, the cold laid hold of her. Leland, who had scarcely spoken, looked down.

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"Are you warm?" he said.

The girl was scarcely willing to admit that she was not; but the frost of the Northwest strikes keen and deep, and, after all, it was his business to attend to her physical comfort.

"No," she said; "I am very cold."

Leland nodded, though there was light enough to show the curious look in his eyes. "Well," he said, "that ought to be excuse enough for me, and it's going to be a good deal colder presently."

He slipped his free arm round her, and drew her to him masterfully. Then he shook the furs higher about her neck with the hand that held the reins, and Carrie, who felt that protest would be useless and undignified, said nothing when she found her shoulder drawn against his breast, though the old fur coat had a faint but unmistakable odour of tobacco and the stable about it.

Leland looked down on her with a little laugh. "After all, that is where you ought to be," he said. "Perhaps, if I am very good to you, you will come there of your own will, by-and-bye."

Carrie said nothing, and, though she felt her cheeks burn, it was not altogether with anger against him. The man had been tactfully considerate, and had deferred to her as she felt that Aylmer would not have done. Indeed, she realised that she owed him a good deal, if only because of the delicacy he had displayed, and which she had scarcely expected from one so much beneath her in station. It was not even so repugnant as she had fancied to lie there warmed by the heat of his body, with his arm about her, and she felt, at least, a comforting confidence in his ability to shelter and protect her. What Leland felt he did not tell her until some time afterwards. He was accustomed to restraint, and, too, the driving occupied most of his attention, for darkness was creeping across the waste, and the snow was deep outside the beaten trail.

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Then the cold increased until it grew numbing, and when the pain ceased, all feeling died out of the girl's hands and feet. She gradually grew drowsy, and, looking up now and then with heavy eyes, saw only the dim shapes of the horses projected against the bitter blueness of the night. Still, at times, they plunged into belts of shadow, where there was a crackling under the runners and a flitting by of ghostly trees that vanished when they once more swept out into the awful cold of the open. Now and then Leland called to the horses, but his voice was lost again next moment in the silence it had scarcely broken. A curious sense of the unreality of it all came upon the girl. She almost felt that, if she could cry out, he and the team would vanish, and all would be with her as it had been in England before she met him. Then the drumming of hoofs grew very faint, and with a half-conscious desire for warmth she crept still closer to the silent man, who looked down on her very compassionately, and then, setting his lips, gave his attention again to the team. She remembered nothing further until she roused herself at a pressure on her arm.

"Prospect is close in front of us," said her companion.

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She raised herself a trifle, and, looking round with a shiver, saw a half-moon sailing low above a dusky mass of trees. What seemed to be a wooden house stood in the midst of them, and its windows flung out streaks of ruddy light upon the snow. Behind it, she could dimly see a range of strange, shapeless buildings. They did not in the least look like English stables, barns, or granaries. Then there was a sound of voices, and a door swung open, letting out a broader track of brightness, in the midst of which the sleigh pulled up. Shadowy figures appeared here and there, and Leland, who unstrapped the robes, rolled them about her. Then, before she quite

realised his purpose, he had lifted her and them together, and was walking stiffly towards the house. In another minute or two he set her down in a little log-walled room which had a tiled stove in the middle of it, and a hard-featured elderly woman came towards her with a kindly smile in her eyes.

"Mrs. Nesbit, Carrie," said the man. "She has been looking after the house for me lately. My wife's 'most frozen, and you'll do what you can to make her comfortable. . . . I suppose those are the fixings from Montreal?"

Mrs. Nesbit said they were, but that they had arrived with one of the sledges too late to be opened that day. Leland pointed to several canvas-covered rolls and bulky cases as he turned to the girl.

"They're curtains and rugs and carpets, and things of that kind," he said. "We don't worry much about them on the prairie, but this room and the next one are your own, unless there are any you like better. We'll get the cases opened to-morrow."

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He went out, and it was some little time later when Carrie found him awaiting her in a great bare room. There were antelope heads, guns, axes, rifles, and here and there a splendid cluster of wheat ears, upon the walls, but there was nothing on the floor, and the furniture appeared to consist of a table, a carpenter's bench, a set of bookshelves, and a few lounge chairs. Still, it was well warmed by the big crackling stove, and she sank with a little sigh of physical content into one of the chairs he drew out. Leland, who now wore a jacket of soft white deer-skin, stooped beside her and took one of her still chilly hands in his. It was also the one on a finger of which there gleamed the ring, and he glanced at it with a queer, half-wistful little smile.

"I hope you will be happy here. What I can do to make it home to you will be done," he said.

He stopped a moment, and, seeing she made no response, went on:

"All the way out I have thought of you sitting here. Since my mother, no woman but Mrs. Nesbit has crossed my threshold. It has been all work and loneliness with me. Won't you try to make it different now?"

He laid his other hand gently on her shoulder, and the girl who bore his name felt her cheeks burn as she turned her eyes away. A caress would have been in one sense a very little thing, but she could not bring herself to invite it then, and she was further warned by what she saw in her companion's eyes.

Leland for a moment closed one of his hard hands. Presently he smiled again and, drawing another of the chairs up, sat down beside her.

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"Well," he said, "you will get used to me by-and-bye, and I only want to please you in the meanwhile. And now about Mrs. Nesbit. We'll send her away if it would suit you, and you can get somebody from Winnipeg, though I don't know that it wouldn't be better to let Jake do the cooking and cleaning as before. It's quite difficult to get maids in this country, and, when you've had them 'bout a week, they marry somebody. Anyway, that's your business. The one thing to be done is what you like, but if you could see your way to keep Mrs. Nesbit, it would please me."

It was almost the only thing he had asked of her, and she was willing to humour him in this. "Of course," she said. "In fact, I rather like her. Who is she?"

"A widow, the mother of one of the boys who drives a team for me. Wages come down when there's little doing with the snow upon the ground, and he's away railroading. I told him I'd see the old lady was looked after until he came back again."

"But how could you have done that, if I had sent her away?"

"I'd have boarded her out with Custer at The Range, whose wife wants help and can't hire it. Mrs. Nesbit would never have known where the money came from."

Carrie Leland smiled. It was only a few months since she had first set eyes upon the man, but she felt that, if she had been his housekeeper, a device of that kind would not have availed with her. There was no doubt that he had his strong points.

Then another young man came in, and was presented to her as Tom Gallwey. He called her husband "Charley", and spoke with a clean English intonation.

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"I'm going round to give the boys their instructions," he said. "We have cleaned out the sod granaries as you cabled. Are we to break into the straw-pile to-morrow?"

"Yes," said Leland. "You'll go on hauling wheat in with every team."

"I suppose you know what has happened to the market? One would fancy it wasn't a good time to sell."

"Still, you'll haul that wheat in. We'll go into the rest to-morrow. Will you come back to supper?"

The young man glanced at Carrie. "If Mrs. Leland will excuse me, I think not," he said, and departed, as he evidently considered, tactfully.

"An Englishman?" said the girl, with a trace of colour in her face.

"I've never asked him, but he talks like one. I struck him shovelling on a railroad, and looking very sick, two or three years ago. Now he gets decent pay for looking after things for me."

Just then another man in weirdly patched blue-jean, who limped in his walk and carried the tray with his left hand, brought in supper. He gazed at Carrie so hard that he spilled some of the contents of the dishes, and, when he went out, she glanced at her husband with a smile.

"I suppose that is another pensioner?" she said.

"No," said Leland. "He earns his pay, and all I did was to make it a little easier for him. He got himself mixed up with a threshing mill at another place a while ago."

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"And he naturally came to you?"

Leland's eyes sparkled shrewdly. "Well," he said, "I guess I get my full value out of him. Won't you come to supper?"

Carrie took her place at the head of the table, and found the pork, fried potatoes, apples, flapjacks, and hot corn-cakes much more palatable than she had expected. She also looked very dainty sitting there in the great bare room, and was not displeased when Leland told her so. In fact, the more she saw of him, the more favourably he impressed her, and, though she remembered always that she was a Denham of Barrock-holme, and he a Western farmer of low degree, she did what she could to be gracious to him. It was not until the meal was over that a trace of the bitterness she had felt towards him came back to her.

"I suppose you posted the letter I gave you at Winnipeg?" she said.

Leland showed some little embarrassment. "I did. I was going to talk to you about it in a day or two, because it wouldn't be quite convenient to have Mrs. Heaton out from Chicago just now."

Carrie glanced at him sharply. "You told me I could fill the house with my friends, if I wished."

"I believe I did," said Leland. "Anyway, I meant it. Still, we're not going to worry about that to-night."

Carrie saw that he was resolute, and discreetly changed the subject. She had not yet quite shaken off the effects of the cold, and in another hour rose drowsily from beside the stove.

Leland opened the door, and stood with his hand on it. "Mrs. Nesbit will see you have everything you want," he said. "Don't come down too early—and good-night."

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He took the hand she held out, and did not let it go at once. The girl felt her heart beat a wee bit faster than usual, as it had done once or twice before that day. Again she felt that it was only fitting she should offer her cheek to him, but it was more than she could do.

Then he dropped her hand, and made her a little inclination as he once more said, "Good-night."

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CHAPTER VII

CARRIE MAKES HER VIEWS CLEAR

It was ten o'clock next morning when Carrie, coming down to breakfast, found that her husband had gone out two or three hours earlier. Gallwey also came in, soon after she had finished the meal, to say that Leland might not be back until the evening, and, when he offered to take her round the homestead, she decided to go with him. Mrs. Nesbit, who equipped her with a pair of lined gum-boots, helped her on with her furs, gazing at them admiringly.

"There's not another set like them on the prairie, and I expect there are very few folks in Montreal have anything quite as smart," she said. "They must have cost a pile of money."

A little flush crept into Carrie's face, but she answered languidly.

"I suppose they did," she said. "Mr. Leland had them made for me."

"Well," said the woman, who gazed at her with an air of deprecation, "you have got a good man, my dear. There's not a straighter or a better-hearted one between Winnipeg and the Rockies—but it would be worth while to humour him a little. He has just a hard spot or two in him, and he generally gets his way."

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Carrie smiled, a trifle coldly. "And so do I."

She went out with Gallwey, but the hard-handed woman stood still a moment with a shadow of anxiety in her eyes, and then sighed a little as she went on with her work again. She would have done a good deal to save Charley Leland trouble, and she foresaw difficulties.

In the meanwhile, the girl found the cold unlike anything she had felt in England, but, after the first few minutes, more endurable than she had expected. There was no trace of moisture in that

crystalline atmosphere, the sun that had no heat in it shone dazzlingly, and the snow that flung the sun's rays back fell from her feet dusty and dry as flour. No cloud flecked the clear blueness overhead, and fainter washes of the same cold colour marked the beaten trails and prints of horse-hoofs that alone broke the gleaming surface of the white expanse below. On the far horizon she could see grey blurs, which were presumably trees.

Gallwey, who was wrapped in an old fur coat from cheeks to ankles, proved an agreeable companion. He led her first a little way back among the slender birches, where she could see the house. It was, she decided, by no means picturesque, a rambling, frame structure roofed with cedar shingles, built round what was evidently the original hut of small birch logs; but it had a little verandah with rude pillars and trellis work on one side of it, and Gallwey assured her there were not many houses in that country to equal it. Then he showed her the barns and stables, built in part of birch logs and for the rest of sods, stretching back into the shelter of the bluff. They were primitive and almost shapeless structures, with roofs that apparently consisted of straw and soil and snow, but she fancied their thickness would keep out even the frost of the Northwest. There were, however, only a horse or two and a few brawny oxen standing in them. Last of all, he led her into one of the most curious edifices she had ever seen. Sitting down on one of the wheat bags inside it, she looked about her.

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It had no definite outline, and, from the outside, it had looked like a great mound of snow, but she now saw that it had a skeleton wall of birch branches. Round this had been piled an immensity of very short straw, and the roof, which had partly fallen in as the bags beneath it had been cut out, consisted of the same material. It was filled with bags of wheat that here and there trickled red-gold grain, and she turned to Gallwey with a question.

"Is this the usual granary?" she said.

Gallwey laughed. "There are quite a few of them in this country. You see, we don't stack the grain here, but leave most of the straw standing, and thresh in the field, whilst most of the smaller men rush their grain in to the railroad elevators as soon as that is done. As a rule, they want their money, but Charley had meant to hold wheat this year."

Carrie felt a little thoughtful, for it was evident that her husband's change of purpose had attracted attention, and she fancied she knew the reason for it.

"The stables are a little primitive, too," she said.

"They are no doubt very different from what you have been accustomed to in England, but they serve their purpose, and in a way they're characteristic of your husband. While there are men who would spend part of their profits making things comfortable, every dollar Charley Leland takes out of the land goes back into it again, and with the increase he breaks so many more acres each year. It's a tolerably bold policy, but that is what suits him, and it has succeeded well so far. For one thing, he wants very little for personal expenses. To all intents and purposes he hasn't any."

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He stopped a moment, and then went on deprecatingly: "I wonder if I may say that I am glad he has married. After all, it is scarcely fit for a man to live as he has done, stripping himself of everything. It has been all effort and self-denial, and you can do so much to make things pleasant for him."

Carrie was touched, though she would not show it. The man, who apparently had no time for pleasure and no thought of comfort, had been very generous to her. It was also evident that there was much a woman could do to brighten the life he led, if it was only to teach him that it had more to offer him than the material results of ceaseless labour. Still, that had not been her purpose in marrying him, and she felt an uncomfortable sense of confusion as she decided that it would have been very much better if he had chosen a woman who loved him. As things were, he must give everything, and there was so little that she could offer.

"Where are all the horses and the men gone?" she asked.

"To the railroad. They started before the sun was up, but Charley has driven twenty miles to meet one of the Winnipeg cattle-brokers. It's wheat or beef only with most men in this country, but we raise the two, and Charley is thinking of cutting out some stock for the market, though it's very seldom done at this season. We only keep store beasts through the winter, and, as they take their chances in the open, when the snow comes they get poor and thin."

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Gallwey excused himself in another minute or two, and Carrie, who went back to the house, spent the afternoon lying in a big chair by the stove with a book, of which she read but little. From what she had heard, it was evident that Leland was selling his wheat and cattle at a sacrifice, which, she could understand, he would naturally not have done, could he have helped it. The reflection was not exactly a pleasant one, for though Branscombe Denham had carefully refrained from mentioning to what agreement he and Leland had come, she was, of course, aware that her marriage had relieved him from some, at least, of his financial difficulties. After all, though she had sacrificed herself for him, she could not think highly of her father, and the fact that her husband had been thus compelled to strip himself was painful to contemplate. It placed her under a heavy obligation to Leland, and there was so little she could do, or, at least, was willing to do, that would free her of it.

It was dark when he came in, walking stiffly, with his fur coat hard with frost, and her heart

smote her again as she saw how his weary face brightened at the sight of her. It cost her an effort to submit to the touch of his lips, but she made it, though she felt her cheeks grow hot, and was sorry she had done so when she saw the glint in his eyes and felt the constraint of his arm. Drawing herself away from him, she slipped back a pace or two. Leland stood looking at her wistfully.

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"I didn't wish to startle you," he said. "Still, it has been a little hard and lonely here, and I fancied it was going to be different now. I was looking forward to a kind word from you all the twenty miles home."

An unusual colour crept into his wife's face. Both of them were glad that Jake limped in just then with the evening meal, which in that country differs in no way from breakfast or the midday dinner. Salt pork, potatoes, apples, flapjacks or hot cakes with molasses, and strong green tea, it is usually very much the same from Winnipeg to Calgary. Few men have more, or desire it, on the prairie, and fewer still have less. At the end of the meal, when Jake had cleared away, Carrie Leland looked up questioningly at her husband, who sat opposite her beside the crackling stove. There was nobody else in the big, bare room.

"You haven't told me why it is not convenient for me to have Ada Heaton here just now," she said.

"You want her very much?" and again the man glanced at her wistfully.

"Yes," said Carrie, "of course I do. I must have somebody to talk to."

Leland made a gesture of vague appeal. "I suppose it's only natural, though I had 'most dared to hope you might be content for a little with my company. Anyway, we won't let that count. Couldn't you bring Mrs. Annersly out? I like her, and she told me that if I asked her she would come and stay a year. Then there's your younger sister."

"You don't suppose that Lily would come to live here?" and there was something in her smile that jarred upon the man.

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"Well," he said, "I'm sorry. She was rather nice to me. Is there nobody else you could think of?"

"One would almost fancy that you were trying to get away from the question. It is why you don't want me to bring Ada Heaton here."

Leland leaned forward a little, and laid his hand upon her arm. "Won't you let it rest to please me? I haven't asked you very much."

The girl was almost tempted to do so, but, unfortunately, she had some notion of what was influencing him, and resented it.

"No," she said coldly. "I really think I ought to know."

"Then I'm sorry, but it wouldn't suit me to have Mrs. Heaton here at all."

"Why?" and an ominous red spot appeared in the girl's cheek as she shook off his arm.

Leland stood up, and, leaning upon the chair-back, looked down at her. Perhaps he felt it gave him an advantage, and he would need it in the struggle which was evidently impending. He had never faced an angry woman before, and he shrank from it now, but not sufficiently to desist from what he felt he had to do.

"I wonder if you have ever asked yourself why Mrs. Heaton is in Chicago when her home is in London," he said. "I can't believe that she told you."

"Ah,"—and Carrie moved her head so that he could see the sparkle in her eyes—"you have heard those tales, and believed them—about a relative of mine. Presumably, you have heard nothing about Captain Heaton?"

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"It was one of your people who told me. They said the man was short of temper. So are a good many of us; and, it seems, he had some reason. Still, there's rather more against Mrs. Heaton than that she's not living with her own husband. Knowing you meant to ask her here, I made inquiries."

The girl turned towards him with anger and contempt in her face, which was almost colourless now, although she fancied that he knew rather more than she did about the recent doings of the lady in question. The pride of family was especially strong in her, as it occasionally is in cases where there is very little to warrant it.

"Your time was well employed," she said. "You who live here with your horses and cattle presume to decide how people of our station should spend their lives."

"There is one thing, at least, expected of a woman who is married; it's the necessary foundation of civilised society. And the woman you want to bring here has openly disregarded it. You must have heard something of the trouble between her and her husband in London, but I can't quite think you know how she came to be in Chicago."

As a matter of fact, Carrie Leland did not know. Still, she would not ask the man, who had apparently laid firm hands upon his temper, and was looking at her appealingly. It was unfortunate that she only remembered he had presumed to cast a slur upon one of her relations, and was, in her opinion, very far beneath her. She refused to answer, and Leland's face grew

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grim.

"Well," he said, "you are in almost every way your own mistress, but there are points on which what I say stands. This house was built for my mother. I have brought my wife home to it now, and Mrs. Heaton does not enter its door."

Carrie rose and faced him, imperious, but at last dangerously cold in her anger.

"Your wife!" she said. "Could you have expected that I should ever be more than that in name to you?"

The veins showed swollen on the man's forehead as he looked at her, and a dark flush crept into his bronzed cheek.

"Madam," he said, "now you have gone that far, you have got to tell me exactly what you mean."

"It should be quite plain. You could buy me. It sounds absurd, of course, and a trifle theatrical, but it is just what took place, and there are no doubt many of us for sale. Isn't that alone sufficient to make me hate you? Can't you realise the sickening humiliation of it, and did you suppose you could buy my love as well?"

Leland made her a little inclination which, though it was the last thing she had expected just then, undoubtedly became him. "I had 'most ventured to hope that you might give it me by-and-bye," he said.

His restraint did not serve him. The girl realised that she was in the wrong, but she had failed in her desire to look down on him. This she naturally felt was another grievance against him. She had the old disdain of those who own the land for those who till it, and, although in this man's case, the contempt she strove to feel seemed out of place, it was horribly humiliating to recognise that she was wholly in his hands.

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"To you?" she said, with a bitter laugh that brought the dark flush to his face again.

Leland laid his hand on her shoulder and gripped it hard.

"I have, perhaps, no great reason for setting too high a value on myself," he said. "What I am you know, but, if you must have plain talk, there were two men made the bargain that disposed of you. It cost me a big share of my possessions to satisfy your father, but he showed no unwillingness to take my cheque, and he would have taken Aylmer's could he have raised him high enough. Who was the lowest down, the Western farmer, who, at least, meant to be kind to you, or Branscombe Denham, who was willing to sell his daughter to the highest bidder? Still, you were right. It was, in one way, about the meanest thing I ever did. The blood was in my face when I made my offer—and your father smiled. By the Lord, if I'd made that proposition to any hard-up wheat-grower between here and Calgary, he'd have whipped me from his door."

The girl had plenty of courage, but she was almost afraid of him now, for there was a strength and grimness in his bronzed face which she had never seen in that of any Denham, and the tightening grip of his ploughman's fingers bruised her shoulder cruelly. Perhaps unconsciously, he shook her a little in a gust of passion, and she set her lips hard to check the cry she would not have uttered had he beaten her.

"Now," he said, "in any case, you belong to me. That has to be remembered always. How are we to go on? What is it to be?"

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Carrie contrived to smile sardonically. "Oh," she said, "sit down, and try to be rational. All this is a trifle ridiculous."

Leland dropped his hand, and, when she sat down, leaned upon the back of the other chair facing her.

"Well?" he said.

"It seems to me that we must quietly try to come to an understanding once for all to-night. In the first place, why did you wish to marry me?"

Leland set his lips for a moment. It would have been a relief just then to tell her that it was to save her from Aylmer, but this appeared a brutality to which he could not force himself, for, in spite of what she had told him, he could not be sure that it had been his only reason. Her shrinking from him, painful to him as it was, nevertheless had its attraction.

"I believe I said that you were the most beautiful woman I had, at least, ever spoken to," he said. "I was a lonely man, and it seemed to me I might, perhaps, do big things some day, with a woman of your kind to teach me what I did not know. That was part of it, but I think there was more. It was a hard life and a bare one here, and I had a fancy that you could show me how much I might have that I was missing. A smile would have helped me through my difficulties; a word or two when one had to choose between the mean and right, and the knowledge that there was some one who believed in me, would have made another and gentler man of me. Well, it seems that you have none of them to give me."

He made an emphatic gesture. "Still, we have to face the position as it is, and my part's plain. Everything you have been used to you shall have, so far as I can get it for you. You can have any of your friends here who will make the journey and be civil to your farmer-husband, and you can

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go to them when it pleases you. To save you ever asking me for money, I will open you an account in a Winnipeg bank, and you need never see me unless you wish to."

"Ah," said Carrie, "you are, at least, generous. To make the understanding complete, what do you expect from me?"

Leland moved and laid his hand upon her shoulder again.

"Only to remember that, however little you think of your husband, you are my wife, after all."

The girl's cheeks burned, but she looked up at him with a little hard laugh. "I think I could have struck you for that, but it must go with the rest. Still, even if I were all that your imagination could picture me, and went as far as Mrs. Heaton did, why should it trouble you?"

Leland stooped lower over her with the veins swollen on his forehead and a glint in his eyes.

"You and your father tricked me—taking all I had to offer for nothing," he said. "I suppose I ought to hate you, too—and still I can't."

Once more he gripped her cruelly. "By the Lord, dolt that I am, I think I almost love you for the grit that made you show your scorn. Still, that doesn't count. It is for me to go it alone."

He let his grasp relax and left her suddenly, turning at the door.

"You will want a companion. Will you write for Mrs. Annersly to-morrow?"

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"I will," said Carrie coldly. "Under the circumstances it is advisable. She will be a protection."

He went out and she saw no more of him for a day or two, but that night she found a blue mark upon the whiteness of her shoulder.

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CHAPTER VIII

LELAND SEEKS DISTRACTION

Dusk was creeping up from the eastwards across the great snow-sheeted plain when Leland pulled his horses up where a little by-track branched off from the beaten trail. Behind him the wilderness, losing its gleaming whiteness and fading into shades of soft blue-grey, ran level to the hard blueness on the northern horizon. In front of him there were rolling rises ridged with sinuous bands of birches, black in broken masses against the lingering light in the south and west. There was room for wheat enough to glut markets of the world on the leagues of rich black loam that undulated to the frozen waters of Lake Winnipeg. Already miles of it were banded together by belts of two-foot stubble; but as yet the plough had not invaded the land of bluff and ravine, creek and coulee, where the shaggy broncho and the wild steer ran.

Leland was wrapped to the eyes in an old fur coat, and his breath rose like steam into the dead still air. A cloud of thin vapour floated above the horses. It was exceptionally cold, and Gallwey, who sat half-frozen beneath the piled-up robes, wondered why his companion had pulled the team up there when they were within some twenty minutes' ride from shelter. Still he did not consider it advisable to inquire, for certain colts of a blooded sire had been missing, and Leland, who had shown signs of temper during the day, looked unusually grim. Flinging the reins to Gallwey, he stepped down stiffly from the sleigh.

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"Drive on slowly, Tom. You don't want to keep a warm team standing in this frost," he said.

Gallwey contrived to clutch the reins, though his hands were numbed through the big mittens.

"What are you going to do?" he asked.

"Look at these tracks," said Leland drily. "They kind of interest me."

Gallwey spoke to the team, and the sleigh, which consisted of a light waggon-box mounted on a runner frame, slid on. Sleighs such as are used about the Eastern cities are not common in the Northwest, where, indeed, the snow seldom lies so deep or long; and the prairie farmer either makes shift with his waggon or contents himself with the humble bob-sled. He now noticed what he had been too cold to notice before, that there was something peculiar about the print of hoofs breaking out here and there, a blur of scattered blue smudges in the trail he followed. Some seemed deeper than others, and there were long spaces where they disappeared altogether. This did not seriously concern him, so he drove on until he reached the first grove of stunted birches which clung beneath the shelter of a winding rise. Here he waited until Leland rejoined him. It was quite dark now, and he could not see his comrade's face at all, but, as he flung himself into the sleigh, he laughed in a fashion of his that Gallwey knew usually portended trouble.

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"Go on," Leland said. "I want my supper, and a little talk with Jeff Kimball, too. One would have figured that man had a little more sense in him. It's 'most two weeks, I think, since you had any snow?"

"A week last Monday. Just enough to dust the trail. Is there anything particular to be deduced from that?"

"Only that we had the rustlers round next day, and I've a kind of notion my colts went then."

Gallwey sat silent while the sleigh glided on. He did not know, of course, that Leland had quarrelled with his wife, but he had noticed the man's grimness during the day, and now he was struck with the ring of his voice as he spoke of the rustlers.

The cattle war in Montana across the neighbouring border, in which the great ranchers and small homesteaders contended for the land, was over; and, when the United States cavalry restored order, little bands of broken men, ruined in the struggle, and cattle-riders who found their occupation gone, had undertaken a smuggling business along the frontier. The Prohibition Act was enforced in neighbouring parts of Canada, and there was accordingly an excellent profit to be made on any whisky they could run. There was, too, among the Chinamen in the United States a good demand for opium, which it was supposed came in via Vancouver. For the most part, the smugglers were tolerated, perhaps from the same motives that prompt otherwise honest people to pardon outlaws who rob the rich and the government. At any rate, a farmer seldom grumbled when a horse was requisitioned, though he knew that the animal might not be returned. As a reward for his silence, he was likely to find mysterious cases of whisky near his trail. His opposite conduct could carry with it many results. For instance, grass-fires, so dangerous to homesteads and ripening crops, had a suspicious way of starting in the harvest season. The small farmer, accordingly, was loth to trouble the mounted police about anything he might have heard or seen, and the rustlers as a rule knew when to stop, and only seized a horse or killed a steer for meat when they urgently needed it.

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"Do you think it's worth while making trouble?" said Gallwey, suggestively.

"I want my colts back," said Leland. "I guess I'm going to get them. Shake that team up. It's getting cold."

Gallwey, who was half frozen already, called to the horses, and in another ten minutes they came into sight of a blaze of cheerful radiance in the gloom of a big bluff. Leland held the big cattle run in the vicinity, though it lay a long ride from his homestead.

Gradually a little log house grew into shape, and Leland, who drove the sleigh round to the back of it before he got out, turned to the man who had slouched from the doorway.

"I guess we'll leave the sleigh here," he said. "We have come for the night, and we'll put the team in while you get supper."

Though he could not see the man's face for the dark, Gallwey fancied he was a little disconcerted at this announcement. In another half-hour, however, they were sitting down to a meal. Leland said very little until it was over, when, taking his pipe out, he pulled a hide chair up to the stove and looked at the man. "Whom have you had round the place the last week or so, Jeff?" he said.

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"Thompson," said the other. "He brought four or five horses along."

"He did. I saw his tracks where he headed off the trail for the back range. Quite sure he hadn't any more? That reminds me; I'll want to see him in a day or two about those steers."

Gallwey fancied this last was meant as an intimation that accuracy was advisable, and he watched the big, loose-limbed man who was filling his pipe just then. He appeared uneasy under all this scrutiny, for Leland was also quietly regarding him.

"Now I come to recollect, it was four."

"Anybody else?" said Leland.

"Custer; he came along with a bob-sled yesterday."

"You can't think of any more?"

"No," said the other man, who flashed a suspicious glance at him. "I can't quite figure how I could when they weren't there."

Leland smoked on tranquilly, apparently considering for a moment or two, and then, straightening himself a little, looked hard at the man.

"Jeff," he said quietly, "it's a kind of pity you don't know enough to make a decent liar."

The man started, but seemed to recover himself again, and it was with quickening interest Gallwey watched the pair. A smoky kerosene lamp gave out an indifferent light, and a red glare beat out from the open door of the stove, streaming uncertainly upon the faces of the men.

It showed Leland sitting motionless, a hard glint in his eyes, and the other man making little uneasy movements as he shrank from the steady gaze. As Leland spoke again, the man winced.

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"If any man had said as much to me, one of us would have been out in the snow by now," he said. "Have you no grit in you? Then why in the name of thunder did you take hold of a contract that was 'way too big for you? Did you think I could be bluffed by a thing like you?"

"I can't quite figure what you mean," said the other man sullenly.

"Then I'll have some pleasure in telling you. Soon after the last snow fell, two rustlers came up this trail—there were more of them, but they stayed down by the big one. When they went away, three of my horses went with them. Now, who caught those horses and had them ready? It's kind of curious, too, that they were the pick of the bunch, with good blood in them. The only man round here who could tell them which were worth the lifting is you. Jeff, you don't know enough to run a peanut stand, and yet you figured you were fit to kick against the man who hired you."

Jeff appeared to rouse himself for an effort. "You're guessing a good deal of it."

"Guessing, when I've lived on this prairie all my life, and the whole thing is written there in the snow. Can't I tell the difference between the tracks of a steady ridden horse and a young one that's not used to the halter? However, I'm open to listen now."

"I've just this to say. It won't hurt you to lose a horse or two, and that's about all anybody has ever taken out of you, while it's quite likely you'll be worse off if you make trouble about it. In fact, taking it all around, you can't afford to get rid of me."

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"Anyway, that is what I mean to do. I have no use for a man who sells my property to his friends. You'll get out of this place to-morrow."

"I guess I'll go right now. Thompson will take me in."

"No," said Leland sharply; "you'll stay just where you are until the morning, though you can take your blankets into the other room as soon as you like. It's quite hard to keep my hands off you, and if you come out before I call you to make breakfast, I'm not going to try."

Jeff said nothing further, but, taking two dirty blankets out of a hay-filled bunk, shuffled away into a second room behind a log partition. Leland went after him, and, laying his hands on the little window, shook it violently.

"If you try to get out that way, we're going to hear you, and then you'll be sorry for yourself," he said.

He came back and, flinging himself into the chair beside the stove, filled his pipe.

"I don't quite know how you worried the thing out, and perhaps it doesn't greatly matter, but I rather think it was good advice he gave you," said Gallwey reflectively. "You certainly can afford to lose a horse or two, and the rustlers are the kind of people it is just as well to keep on good terms with. Sergeant Grier has only three or four troopers, and the outpost is quite a long way off."

Leland smiled. "Well," he said, "horse-stealing is getting to be a good deal more profitable business than liquor-running. They get horses for nothing, and they have to buy the whisky. They haven't gone very far into it yet, but it's a sure thing that they will if they find out that none of us seem to mind it. Somebody has to make a protest, and it may as well be me."

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"So far as my observation goes, most men would rather let their neighbour make it first," said Gallwey drily. "You, however, seem to be an exception."

Leland's face hardened. "The fact is, I feel like taking it out of somebody soon. I have had a good deal to worry me."

"One would not have expected you to feel like that just now."

"I guess we'll change the subject," said Leland grimly. "You are wondering what I sent Jeff in there for? Well, I didn't want him loose on the prairie. It seems to me he's expecting a visit from his friends, and I'd just as soon they came and let me have a word with them. You get into the bunk there, and go to sleep until I want you."

Wrapping one of the sleigh robes about him, Gallwey lay down for the night. He saw Leland put the light out and sit down again by the snapping, crackling stove. Through its open door a flickering radiance now and again touched his earnest face. Though they had been out since dawn in the stinging frost, he sat firmly erect, gripping his unlighted pipe and gazing straight in front of him with hard, unwavering eyes. Behind him the shadows played upon the walls of the gloomy shanty, quiet save for the moan of the bitter wind. Gallwey, who did not think it was the rustlers, wondered what was worrying his comrade, until his eyes grew heavy, and, though he had not intended it, he fell asleep wearily.

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Leland, however, sat still while the crackle of the stove died away, and the stinging cold crept in. He had much to think of, and could see no way out of the difficulties that beset him and his wife. He had known that she had no love for him, but, since the night she had met him on the terrace steps at Barrock-holme, his admiration for her had grown steadily stronger, and he had been conscious of a curious tenderness whenever he thought of her. Her smile was worth the winning by any effort he could make, and the odd kind word she occasionally flung him would set his heart thumping.

Then the revelation had come, and left him dismayed. He had never counted on her hating him, as it now seemed she must do, or regarding him as one so far beneath her that the most she could feel for him was an impersonal toleration. He was a proud man, and her words had stung him deeply. It was galling to realise that he was bound to a woman who shrank from him and despised him, and that the bonds were unbreakable, no matter how irksome they might become

to both his wife and himself.

Then that mood passed, for there was a silent, deep-seated optimism in him that had carried him through frozen harvests and adverse seasons, and he began to appreciate her point of view, and that it might not be an unalterable one. He did not blame her for her courage, or even for her scorn, though it had hurt him horribly. It was for him to prove it unwarranted, or with patience to live it down, but he did not know how either could be done, and now and then a little fit of anger set his blood tingling as he sat in the growing shadows beside the emptying stove. His resentment was not so much against the woman as the man who had, knowing what she must feel, forced her into marrying him; but they were in England, and he felt illogically that he must strike at some one nearer, which was why he waited for the rustlers. He had no pistol. It is not often that the plainsman carries arms in Western Canada, but there was a big axe at Jeff's wood-pile, which would, he fancied, serve in case of necessity. At last, when the stove had almost gone out, he roused himself to attention with a little start in the bitter cold and, rising, touched Gallwey.

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"Get up!" he said. "Slip in behind the door, and shut it when I tell you. There are horses on the trail."

Gallwey did as he was bidden, half asleep, though he heard a beat of hoofs that grew louder. Then there was a stamping of feet outside, and Leland flung a few split billets through the open top of the stove. A sharp crackling followed, and a blaze sprang up, but the light only flickered here and there, leaving the room almost dark.

"Let them in!" he said.

The door swung open. Two shadowy figures, shapeless in fur coats and caps, appeared in the opening, and one of them turned sharply when Gallwey slammed the door behind him.

"Now," he said, "what is that for? I don't seem to recognise you, anyway."

Leland laughed. "Come right in, gentlemen. I've been waiting to see you, and there's no mistake. Jeff's in the second room yonder, and if he ventures to come out with any notion of making trouble he'll run a considerable risk of getting himself hurt."

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He had raised his voice a trifle, and the rustle that had commenced died away in token that Jeff had heard. In the meanwhile one of the rustlers had slipped his hand inside his furs; but Leland, who noticed it, made a little gesture.

"I guess it's not worth while," he said. "If you'll sit down a minute, I have a word or two to say to you."

One of the men did so, but the other stood near the door watching Gallwey, who was, on the whole, thankful that he had taken down Jeff's rifle.

"Well?" said the first outlaw. "It was Jeff who gave us away?"

"Not exactly. At least, he didn't mean to. You should have got a smarter man before you ventured to put up a bluff on me. Still, that's not the question. When are you going to bring my horses back?"

"I'm afraid I can't quite promise," said the other with a chuckle. "With us, finding is sometimes keeping."

"You have two weeks. If they're not back in that time, you're going to be sorry."

The outlaw laughed openly. "Come down and look at it reasonably. We have got to live, and we have, after all, stuck you for very little. With four police troopers to watch this part of the country, there's nothing you can do. I guess we've got our grip on it just now."

"You have two weeks to bring back my horses in."

"Then you mean to insist on it?" said the other man.

"I do. Don't you get to thinking the honest men in this country are a bit afraid of you. They're only lazy. We have nothing to do with the whisky, but this horse-lifting has got to be stopped. Get out, and remember it, before I use my feet on you."

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The outlaw was a big man. As he slipped his hand beneath his furs, Leland quietly reached for the axe.

"I could shear your arm off before you got it out," he said. "Will you lay it down, and see if you can stop in this shanty when I tell you to get out."

The rustler looked at him for a moment, and, though there was very little light, was apparently satisfied.

"No," he said. "I guess that's not business, anyway. You won't get your horses, but I'll give you good advice. Sit tight, and mind your farming, and it's quite likely you won't lose any more. We're not nice folks when we're roused, but we're not looking for trouble."

"You'll get it," said Leland drily, "unless my horses are back two weeks to-night. Open the door, Tom, and let the gentlemen out."

CHAPTER IX

FARMERS IN COUNCIL

Nearly three weeks had slipped by since Leland met the outlaws, and his horses were missing still, when he sat in council at Prospect with a few of his scattered neighbours one bitter night. The big room was as bare and comfortless as it had been in his bachelor days, though there were cases at the railroad station whose contents would have transformed it, had he troubled to haul them in. Leland was somewhat grim of face, for the past few weeks had not been pleasant ones to him.

The breach between him and his wife was still as wide as ever, and he felt it the more keenly because, since the night of their frankness, she had shown no sign of anger. Instead, she had treated him with a civility that was hard to bear, and had professed herself content with all the arrangements at Prospect as they were. Leland was too proud a man to make advances which he felt would be repelled, and decided bitterly that, since nothing he could do would please her, the comforts she did not seem to care about might stay where they were until they rotted. Her own rooms, at least, were furnished and fitted luxuriously, in so far as he had been able to contrive it, and, since she spent most of her time in them, the one in which his mother had lived was good enough for him. Still, all this reacted upon his temper, and, on the night when he had his neighbours there, he was feeling the strain.

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There were four of them, men who toiled early and late, and had a stake in the country, and they were all aware that others would probably be influenced by what they did. They listened to him gravely, sitting about the crackling stove with a box of cigars on the little table in front of them. There was nothing to drink, however, since, for several reasons, including the enactments of the legislature, strong green tea is the beverage most usually to be met with on the prairies, and of that they had just had their fill at supper. There was silence until one of them turned to the rest with a twinkle in his eyes.

"I'm with Charley Leland in most of what he says," he said. "The law's necessary, as you find out when you have lived, as I have, in a country where there isn't any. Still, after all, the enforcing of it is the business of the legislature, and the most they do for us is to worry us for statistics and fine us for not ploughing unnecessary fire-guards. Then there are two or three of us on this prairie who aren't fond of tea, and, as things are, we generally know where to get a little Monongahela or Bourbon when we want it. I guess it would give a kind of tone to this *soirée* if we had some of it now."

There was approving laughter until another man spoke.

"That's quite right, just as far as it goes," he said. "Give me a chance of a square kick at the Scott Act, and I'll kick—like a mule. In the meanwhile, there it is, and you have to figure if breaking it is worth while. When you begin making exceptions, it's quite hard to stop. Now, I don't want to go round with a pistol strapped on to me, and, while we stand by the law, it isn't necessary. So long as I know that the crops I raise are mine and nobody can take them from me, I can do without my whisky. That's why I'm with Charley Leland in this thing, and you have to remember it's quite a big one."

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"It is," said a third speaker. "Here we are, a few scattered farmers with stables and granaries that will burn, and horses that can be run across the frontier. Behind us stand Sergeant Grier and his four troopers, while, if we back up Leland, we have a tolerably extensive organisation against us, and the men who belong to it aren't going to stick at anything. If we are willing to live and let live, what do we stand to lose? A horse borrowed now and then, an odd steer killed, perhaps, an unbranded beast or two missing. Well, I guess it might work out cheaper than the other thing."

There was silence for a moment or two, and then a young man looked up languidly. He had come out four or five years before from Montreal.

"There is hard sense in all we have heard, but I think Leland's point of view is nearest the Academic one," he said. "Every honest man has a duty to the State, and it is certainly going to cost him more than he gains if he won't discharge it. There are probably more honest men than rogues everywhere, and yet one usually sees the rogues uppermost, for this reason: the honest man won't worry so long as they don't rob him, and his neighbour can't make a fight alone. Nobody is anxious to face the first blow for the benefit of the rest, and so the rogue gets bolder, until he becomes intolerable. Then the honest man stirs himself, and the rogues go down, though it causes ever so much more trouble than it would have done if the thing had been undertaken earlier. I'll give you an example. Begbie hung a man in British Columbia, the first one who wanted it, and there was order at once. Coleman and his vigilantes, who were scarcely quick enough, had to hang them by the dozen in California. Now we come to the question: How bad have things got to be before you think it worth while to do anything?"

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It was evident that he had made an impression. He had shown them the dangers of toleration; and they were men who, while they did little rashly, believed in the greatness of their country. They looked at Leland, who turned to them with a little grim smile.

"They have gone quite far enough for me," he said. "I'm going to move now. The one thing I want to ask is, who is going to stand in with me?"

The man who had last spoken glanced at the rest. "I think you can count upon the four of us."

There was a murmur of concurrence, and Leland smiled. "As a matter of fact, I did so already, and asked Sergeant Grier to ride across and meet you to-night. He should be here any minute now. In the meanwhile I want to say that I've been riding up and down the country lately, and have reasons for supposing there's a big load of whisky to be run during the next few days."

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As they talked over this news, there was a knocking at the outer door, and a grizzled man who wore what had once been a very smart cavalry uniform was shown into the room. He sat down and listened with grave attention to what Leland had to say. Then he looked up quietly.

"I have to thank you, gentlemen, and I'll swear you in," he said. "From what I can figure, it must be Ned Johnston's gang, and they're about the hardest of the crowd. I haven't much fault to find with Mr. Leland's programme except on a point or two."

They discussed it for an hour, and, when all was arranged, one of them laughed as he laid his hand on Leland's shoulder. "I guess you're doing the right thing," he said. "Still, in one way, it's a little curious that it's you."

"Why?"

"Well," said the other man drily, "if I had just been married to a woman like Mrs. Leland, I figure I mightn't have been so willing to put myself in the way of a bullet. I'd have let somebody else make the first move and stayed at home with her."

Leland's face grew a trifle hard, as he forced a laugh. "I scarcely think marriage has made any great change in me, or that it's likely to do so."

Then his guests drove away, but the man to whom he had spoken remembered the look in Leland's face.

"Now I wonder what Charley meant by that," he said, getting into his sleigh.

Leland in the meanwhile had flung himself down into a chair beside the stove, and was lying there moodily with an unlighted pipe in his hand, when his wife came in. It was evident that he did not notice her, and she had misgivings as she noticed the weariness in his attitude. After all, he was her husband, and he looked very lonely in the big bare room. She sat down beside him and touched his arm. "Your friends have gone?" she said.

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The man looked up sharply, and she saw the little glow in his eyes, which, however, faded out of them again.

"Yes," he said. "I hope we did not disturb you."

"You were suspiciously quiet. What were you plotting together?"

"Nothing," said Leland. "That is, nothing you would probably care to hear about."

Carrie felt repulsed, though she would not show it. She had meant to be amiable, and she was a somewhat determined young woman, so she tried again.

"Isn't it a little lonely here?" she said. "Why did you not come up to me? I have scarcely seen you the last few days."

Leland's smile was not exactly reassuring. "I don't want to trouble you too often. Besides, I have been out in the frost since early morning, and feel a little tired and drowsy. One naturally doesn't care to appear to any more disadvantage than is necessary."

Carrie's lips and brows straightened portentously. "Were you afraid I might point it out to you, or do you wish to make it evident to everybody that you are purposely keeping out of my way?"

"I suppose I should have thought of that, but it's a thing that never occurred to me. Still, you asked me another question, and, though perhaps it's weak of me, I can't help giving you an answer."

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He stopped a moment and pointed round the desolate room, while the girl realised its dreariness as she saw the dry white ears on the walls quiver in the icy draughts and heard the wailing of a bitter wind outside the birch-log walls.

"Do you suppose—this—is what I bargained for when I asked you to marry me? You took the trouble not long ago to point out very plainly what you thought of me, and I think you meant every word of it. It was rather a bitter draught, but perhaps your point of view was a natural one. I am not the kind of man you have been accustomed to. In fact, there are very few points on which I resemble your father or Jimmy."

"Ah," said Carrie, "that was not meant to be conciliatory. It rather emphasises the distinction you

mention. Still, I think you had not finished."

"Not quite. When you are willing to take me as I am, without prejudice, and give me a chance of winning your liking, you will not find me backward. Until then, I have a little too much self-respect to support you in pretending to be the dutiful wife because you think it becoming. Your contempt was honest, anyway."

Carrie rose with a little languid gesture. "I wonder how long this exceptionally pleasant state of affairs could be expected to continue?"

"Until you change your mind, or one of us is dead. If you get tired of it in the meanwhile, you can always go back to the Old Country for a few months or so."

"It is really a little difficult to understand what could have induced you to marry me."

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Leland looked at her with a little grim smile. "I believe I gave you my reasons on another occasion. It would be rather more to the purpose to ask why you were content with them?"

The girl's cheeks burned, but she turned from him languidly. "You almost tempt me to tell you," she said. "Still, perhaps I have already let my candour carry me too far."

She went out of the big room quietly and naturally, but, when she reached her own apartment, she clenched her hands passionately. Though she was very angry, she had to realise that the man's attitude under the circumstances was by no means astonishing. She had also exactly what she had wished for, since it was clear that he would make no embarrassing advances now; and yet her courage almost failed her as she looked forward to an indefinite continuance of their present relations. He had said that, unless she made it, there could be no change until one of them was dead.

It was the next day, and she had seen nothing of Leland, when she met Gallwey, with whom she had become friendly.

The young man, she saw, was quite willing to constitute himself her devoted servant. At the same time, she felt the sincerity of his attachment for her husband, and drew from it a comfortable sense of security.

"Of course, you have heard the news?" he said. "I don't know if I'm presuming, or if it's kind to admit anything that might distress you, but it would be a relief to me if you could persuade Charley to be careful. I'm not quite sure he realises what he has undertaken."

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Carrie had, of course, heard nothing, though she naturally refused to admit it. She also realised the irony of the fact that everybody except herself seemed attached to her husband. They were then standing in the big general room; but, after she had sat down and smilingly pointed the young man to a place near her, ten minutes of judiciously directed conversation left her with a tolerably clear notion of the state of affairs. She was also sensible of an illogical feeling of dismay and apprehension.

"But why does he do it?" she asked.

Gallwey looked thoughtful. "Well," he said, "somebody will have to take the thing up eventually, and, when there is anything unpleasant but necessary, Charley is usually there to do it. I almost fancy he can't help it. As they say in this country, that is the kind of man he is. Still, under the circumstances, I really think he ought to let the others take an equal risk, and it might be advisable for you to impress it upon him."

"You believe that what I said would have any influence?" asked Carrie, with a curious little smile.

"Of course!" and Gallwey gazed at her reproachfully. "Surely that ought to be evident."

"Well," said the girl, with a trace of languidness, "I have to thank you for warning me, and I will do what I can, though I am not very certain it will have any great effect on him."

Gallwey left her a few minutes later. Carrie, who was now very thoughtful, saw nothing of her husband that night or during most of the next day. He came in and asked for supper a little before dusk, and, when he had eaten it, carefully went over the lock and magazine action of a forty-four Marlin rifle. Then he put on his furs and girt himself with a bandolier. On reaching the outer door, he heard a swift patter of footsteps on the neighbouring stairs. As Carrie came up to him he stood still, with the blue rifle-barrel gleaming over his shoulder, looking like a giant in his shaggy coat. She was dressed, as he noticed, unusually prettily, and, although he set his lips, the little sparkle crept into his eyes. As it faded, the bronzed face, barely visible beneath the fur cap, became once more impassive.

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The girl walked steadily up to him, and laid a hand upon his arm.

"You have given me a good deal, but I scarcely think I have asked you for anything yet. I want you to run no risk that isn't necessary to-night," she said.

Leland started, but again he put a constraint upon himself.

"So you know?" he said.

"Of course! Did you think, when everybody else knew, you could keep it from me? Still, that isn't what I asked you. I want you to be careful."

Leland looked at her, and though she saw the blood creep slowly into his face, his restraint was also evident.

"Did you say that because you believed it was the correct thing, madam?" he asked.

Carrie flushed, but the man, shaking her hand off his arm, laid his big mittened one upon her shoulder, and, holding her away from him, looked down on her gravely.

"You will try to forgive me that. It was a trifle brutal," he said, and his voice sank. "Still, to be quite honest, I could scarcely think that any risk I ran could cause you very much anxiety."

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Carrie said nothing, for, with that steady gaze upon her, she could not pretend, even if her pride would have permitted her; and Leland smiled a trifle wistfully. His face was almost gentle now.

"Well," he said, "you needn't force yourself to say it would, if it hurts you, and I daresay it was kindness that prompted you to try. Still, you see, I should want a good deal, and anything you didn't mean wouldn't satisfy me. After all, it would make things easier for you if I didn't come back again."

The girl shivered. "You surely can't believe I would think of that?"

"No," and Leland made a little gesture, which was expressive of weariness; "it was your sense of fitness that turned you against me."

He let his hand fall from her shoulder. "After all, my dear, I am sorry for you."

"And yourself?"

"It is a little rough on me, but that can't be helped. Somehow or other I guess I can bear it."

Then he stooped, and, taking one of her hands, held it between both of his before he turned and flung open the door.

Carrie saw him for a moment, a tall, black figure silhouetted against the cold blue, and then he had vanished into the night.

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CHAPTER X

HOMICIDE

An almost intolerable cold had descended upon the prairie when Leland reached the coulee where Sergeant Grier was mustering his forces late at night. They were not a very strong body, three troopers of the Northwest Police, all of them rather young, two prairie farmers, Leland, Gallwey, and the Sergeant, but the latter had decided that they would be enough, for the purpose. He was aware that, in an affair of this kind, a few men who understand exactly what they have to do, and can be relied on to set about it quietly and collectedly, are apt to prove more efficient than a larger body. The unnecessary man, he knew, is usually busy getting in his comrade's way. There was also another reason which Leland had pointed out. Since his acquaintances had undertaken the business, it was advisable that they should carry it out without exposing themselves unnecessarily to the outlaws' vengeance. There were several bands of the latter acting more or less in concert, and it would lessen the risks if there were only three or four men liable to them in place of several times as many.

The Sergeant quite concurred in this, and, when Leland rode up stiff with frost, quietly sent the men out to their stations. Just there, the beaten trail that led south to the frontier dipped into one of the winding ravines, traversing the country with many a loop and bend. A sluggish creek flowed through its bottom beneath the ice, and a growth of willows and birches that there found shelter from the winds straggled up its sides. Trees fringed the crest of the dip, too, and in places overflowed into the prairie in scattered spurs. The trail ran through their midst, and there was no doubt that, if the outlaws came at all, which was not certain, they would come that way, since there are disadvantages attached to leading loaded horses through a thick birch-bluff in the darkness.

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A farmer and one of the troopers were sent back to where the trees ran farther out into the prairie, and they were to lie hidden there and cut off the retreat in case the rustlers endeavoured to head back the way they had come. The main body lined the trail in the thickest of the bluff, just below the crest of the ravine, and Leland and one young trooper proceeded to the foot of the declivity. It would be their business to stop anybody who might succeed in breaking through the rest of the ambushade. Each of them knew precisely what was expected of him, and the only uncertainty was whether the rustlers were coming, and if so, how many there would be of them.

It was a suitable night for their purpose, neither too dark nor too light. The heavens were barred with drifting wreaths of cloud, between which every now and then a half-moon and an occasional star shone down. The birches wailed as they shook their frail twigs beneath a bitter wind. Leland was sensible of a distressing tingling in his numbed feet and hands. The young trooper beside

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him limped and stumbled, a shadowy, indistinct figure in his furs, stiff with cold. Their softly moccasined feet made no sound. Both of them wondered whether they could use their slung rifles, if the necessity arose.

It is possible, without feeling desperately cold, to face the frost of the Northwest in a prairie waggon when one is packed about with hay and wrapped in big fur robes, but there are times when the man who travels on horseback runs the risk of freezing, and, because horses might be wanted, farmers and police troopers had ridden instead of driving. Leland was capable of moving, but the young trooper was in a far worse state, and sighed with relief when at last they stopped beside the creek, where a dense growth of willows kept off the stinging wind.

"I'm that cold I 'most can't hump myself," he said. "Seems to me I haven't got any feet on. I guess they're froze. Still, it's not quite so cruel as the night the corporal got one of his nipped. We were sleeping way back up Long Traverse trail in a pit in the snow, and were too played-out to waken when the fire got low. The frost had the corporal by the morning, but we'd most of twenty leagues to make, with two or three mighty cold camps on the way, and his moccasins opened up a wound. You couldn't have told he had a foot when I last saw him."

Leland said nothing. He was not inclined for conversation, and knew that instances of the kind were not uncommon. The wardens of the prairie probably know more about cold than anybody, except Arctic explorers, and they are expected to face it shelterless in the open for days together when occasion arises. They cannot always find a birch-bluff to camp in, and the snow is frequently too thin to throw up a bank between them and the wind. Only hard men continue in that service, and perhaps the prairie wolf alone knows what becomes of some of the unfit who try it.

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The lad, however, seemed impelled to talk, and stamped up and down beating his mittened hands, with the swivel of his slung carbine jangling as he moved.

"One would 'most wonder why you folks took a hand in," he said. "I guess if I'd been a farmer, it's more than I'd have done myself. There seem to be a blame lot of the rustlers, and, so far as we can figure, they stand in together. The three or four of us can't be everywhere at once, and they might take a notion of getting even by playing the fire-bug when the grass is dry in harvest season. I'd plough my fire-guards twice as wide. It would be quite easy to burn up a ripening crop."

Leland was aware that there would, unfortunately, be no difficulty in doing this, but he was willing to take his chances, and did not answer the lad. Indeed, the probable loss of a crop appeared a comparatively small matter to him just then. He was sore and bitter, and a feud with the outlaws would have been almost a relief. He felt that Branscombe Denham had tricked him, but sincerely desired to stand well with his wife, in spite of her scornful attitude towards him. He did not blame her for that altogether, though her words still rankled, but he would not expose himself to her disdain again, and had decided that if things were to be different, the first advances must be made by her. In the meanwhile, it was singularly unpleasant to both of them, and that night he was in a very sensitive and somewhat dangerous mood as he stood shivering among the willows.

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"I guess they should be here by now, if the fellow who told us was playing a straight game," said the lad. "The trouble is, they've a good many friends, and nobody can tell exactly who's standing in with them. It's kind of easier to pick up an odd case of whisky and say nothing than to give us the office and have a fire-stick shoved into your granary. I'm not counting too much on the Ontario man."

In the meanwhile, the others fretted at the cold, and wondered how long the outlaws meant to keep them waiting. Two of them, upon whom all the rest depended for the warning, were just then crouching, almost frozen, where the thinnest of the birches broke off abruptly, watching a group of vague, shadowy shapes moving in their direction across the white wilderness. Gallwey stood behind them. A bank of sombre cloud sailed across the moon, and left the watchers in almost utter darkness.

"I can make out four, and there are more behind," said the trooper. "It's a sure thing. Snow's deep, and, as we figured, they'll stick to the trail. Guess you'd better get back and tell the Sergeant."

Gallwey slipped away, and there was silence for several minutes while farmer and policeman crept a little further back amidst the trees. Then a soft patter of hoofs and an occasional rattle came up the bitter wind as a line of men and horses grew into shape. They came on boldly, the men growling to one another and at the beasts. With no outriders forward, they plunged into the shadow of the birches. There the sounds grew louder, and the thud of hoofs, hoarse voices, crackle of trodden twigs, and creaking and jolting of burdens on pack-saddles, rang startlingly distinct through the crisp air. The trooper counted at least a dozen horses, but he could not quite make out how many men, for they walked among the loaded beasts, and the trail was very dark.

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They went on by, half-seen, dim shadows that jostled one another among the trees; and, when the voices and the trampling grew less distinct, the trooper moved out into the trail, with his carbine in his mittened hands. The trap was sprung, for, if one or two of the outlaws succeeded in breaking through, it was evident that they must, at least, leave their beasts behind. With the farmer close behind him he moved cautiously a little nearer his comrades and then stood still again.

It was, perhaps, five minutes later when Leland, who was pacing to and fro, stopped abruptly, and held up his hand as the young trooper materialised out of the gloom in front of him.

"Can't you hear something?" he said.

The trooper thought he could, but his ears were almost covered by the big fur cap, and whilst they stood listening the birches swayed and wailed before a bitter gust. It seemed to search them to the marrow, for the cold was keen as a knife. Then through the night there came a dull, thudding sound down from the ridge above, and the trooper flung his carbine forward.

"They're here, sure," he said. "It's even chances we don't get a whack at one of them."

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They stood listening for a minute or two, intent and high-strung, and heard only the wailing of the wind, for the birches once more swayed about them. It was almost dark, for the moon was still behind a cloud. As he moved his mittened hands on the Marlin rifle, Leland forgot that he was stiff in every limb. Then a voice rang, harsh and commanding, out of the shadows above them.

"Stop right there," it said. "We have got you covered."

It was followed by the whip-like crack of a pistol-shot, there was the louder jarring ring of a carbine or a farmer's rifle, and a confused din broke out. Men shouted and scuffled in the gloom, loaded beasts blundered among the trees and the undergrowth, while through it all there rose the detached beat of hoofs.

"One or two of them lit out, anyway," said the trooper. "Guess they'd slash the pack lariat, and get into the saddle when they'd let the whisky go. That sounds like one of the boys after them. Chancing a gallop, too. They'll break their necks certain, if they ride that way through the bluff."

He stopped a minute, and just then a faint silvery radiance swept athwart the birches as the moon shone down. It sparkled on the dropping smear of snow-sheeted trail, and the lad ran forward a pace or two fumbling with his carbine.

"Look out, Mr. Leland!" he shouted. "There are two of them riding slap down on us."

Two indistinct objects swept out of the shadows, and a moment later resolved themselves into men and galloping horses. They were thundering headlong down the sharply falling trail, and Leland felt his nerves tingle as he watched them. He was in a particularly unpleasant temper that night, and the prospect of an encounter stirred the half-frozen blood in him. He glanced over his shoulder, and saw the trooper standing a few paces away from him, and then fixed his gaze up the trail ahead. The horsemen were coming on at a mad gallop, taking their chances of a stumble, and he could see the powdery snow whirl about them like dust. Then they saw him standing grimly still in the middle of the trail, for one shouted a warning to the other, and the trooper cried aloud:

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"Hold on! Pull up before we plug you," he said.

There was no answer. The riders were hard and fearless men, probably wanted by Montana sheriffs for things they had done during the cattle war, and they showed no sign of drawing bridle. One of them howled shrilly as he whirled a whip about his shoulders, and for a moment Leland saw him sway in the saddle with the beast stretched out beneath him.

Then there was a flash, and a detonation he scarcely heard, a cloud of smoke that floated up the trail, and man and horse came thundering down on him. He felt the jar of the Marlin rifle on his shoulder as he aimed at the flying form of a horse. In another moment the outlaw was almost upon him. Then in savage recklessness he leapt forward instead of back, with a hand that sought the bridle and an arm the rider's leg. His fingers closed on something—bridle, or saddle, or stirrup—and he clung with a stiffened grasp, while his feet were torn from under him and a rifle flashed.

Exactly what happened after that he did not know, but he was hurled forward, still clutching at something, with feet that scraped the snowy ice of the creek; and then there was a heavy crash, and what he held was torn away from him. He felt himself driven into a bank of snow, and lay there for perhaps a minute wondering vaguely if the life had all been smashed out of him, and listening to a sound of scuffling and floundering close by. Next he essayed to draw one of his feet up, and, to his astonishment, found that he had no great difficulty in accomplishing it. That done, he raised himself shakily, and, scrambling to one of the birches, leaned against it, gasping a little. A few seconds earlier he had been almost certain that he would never stand up again.

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In the meanwhile the moonlight had grown a trifle brighter, for he could see a horse that lay near the middle of the creek still moving convulsively. Nearby, wrapped in an old fur coat, was an object that did not move at all. The trooper, who now had no carbine, stood stooping a little as he looked down on it, and there was a curious significant stillness in his attitude, whilst as much as could be seen of his young face appeared a trifle colourless. It was a moment or two before he became aware that Leland was on his feet again.

"He's dead, sure. It's the first man I ever plugged," he said, and his voice rang strained and harsh in the frosty air. "He just pitched off and never moved. Guess it couldn't have hurt him."

One could have fancied he was anxious about the point, but in another moment he turned away with a little deprecatory gesture, and commenced to grope about for his carbine.

"Anyway, I couldn't help it, and it was that quick—he never wriggled any—he couldn't have felt it."

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The thing had its effect on Leland, though he had seen something very like it happen before, and he laid his hand reassuringly on the lad's shoulder.

"I don't think you need worry," he said. "He took his chances when he wouldn't stop, and it's not your responsibility. Anyway, we may as well make quite sure that he is dead."

There was no doubt on that point when he dropped on one knee beside the man, and he nodded as he glanced at the trooper.

"A sure thing. I'd like some kind of notion of what happened," he said.

"You jumped at him yonder, but I didn't quite see what you got hold of. Anyway, you went along with the horse—and him—until I pulled off, and you all came down together. You went down on the ice with a bang 'most fit to break it, and then into the snow-bank yonder. Guess you plugged the horse in a soft place when you fired. In the meanwhile the other man went by—whooping—like a whirlwind."

That was about all the explanation Leland ever got, but in another moment or two the trooper, who seemed to be looking at him curiously, spoke again.

"I'm kind of dazed," he said. "There's quite a lot of blood running down your forehead. I've been watching, and it never struck me you'd better know. I'll go up now and tell the Sergeant 'bout the other fellow who lit out."

Leland, who thrust back his fur cap and felt the gash on his forehead, decided that he was a little confused too, or he would have noticed that there was a warm trickle running down the outside of his nose. His mittens showed red smears in the moonlight when he tried to brush it away. When he next looked round, the trooper had disappeared; and, moving rather shakily, for his fall had not been without its effect, he too plodded up the climbing trail.

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When he reached the level, he found several dejected men with manacled hands, and a line of loaded horses with two of the troopers watching them. The Sergeant, who appeared to be giving instructions to one of the troopers, turned to him.

"We have got four of them and most of the horses, but, so far as I can figure, two or three must have got away," he said. "The boys will try to pick their tracks up, and I'll ask you to give us a hand with the pack-horses as far as the forking of the trail."

Leland contrived to drive two of the loaded train, though his head was aching and he felt very dizzy. When at last he was about to turn off into a second sledge-track, the Sergeant pulled up his horse beside him.

"We are much obliged, Mr. Leland, and you'll hear all that's done," he said. "Still, it's a kind of pity one of the two you fell in with got away."

"I don't suppose you are particularly pleased any of them broke through, for that matter," said Leland.

The Sergeant made a little impressive gesture. "The point is that they'd both have got off, if it hadn't been for you, and that fellow's partner isn't going to blame—the trooper. That's all in the business. Well, if I were you, I'd keep clear of the bluffs and ravines if you have to go out when it's dark."

He shook his bridle and rode on, whilst Leland stood a minute or two watching the others straggle out along the trail. Last of all a trooper led a horse which carried an amorphous burden wrapped in a fur coat, and lashed on with a pack-lariat. Something that looked like a moccasined foot trailed down on one side in the snow, and, judging from the trouble the beast gave its driver, it did not like what it carried.

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"It's quite likely that fellow's partner will try to get even," he said.

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CHAPTER XI

SEEDTIME

The snow had gone, and the frost-bleached prairie lay steaming under the warm April sun, when Carrie Leland pulled her team up on the crest of a low rise. The waggon she drove, a light vehicle of four high wheels with a shallow, box-like body, had been made especially for her. It was hung on comfortable springs, and the harness and horses matched it. There were few broncho teams on the prairie to compare with hers. They were young, but Carrie liked a mettlesome beast, and Leland had carefully chosen and broken them.

It was the same with everything he had given her. Only the best that could be had seemed good

enough for her, and at times she almost resented his generosity. Save when he lost his temper, which happened not infrequently, she could not put him in the wrong, and she often felt that it would be easier for her if she could charge him with neglect, or had something to forgive him. He was gravely considerate for her comfort, but it was very seldom that he went any further. While this should have pleased her, she was not quite sure that it did.

On the morning in question, Eveline Annersly, who had been at Prospect a month now, sat beside her rejoicing in the sunshine and rush of warm wind. She had reached the age when one looks for little and makes the most of what comes, and the warmth and freshness of the morning delighted her. The prospect would also in all probability have had its attractions for any one with eyes to see and a nature that could respond to the reawakening pulse of life in the land. [Pg 122]

Round three-fourths of the horizon the bleached prairie, tinged now with sunny ochre, melted into the sweep of lustrous blue, but in the foreground the sod was gemmed with little crocus-like flowers and already flecked here and there with creeping green. All this was waste and virgin, but on the fourth side tall bands of golden stubble, and belts of ashes where golden stubble had once been, were narrowed down by the steaming chocolate-tinted clods of the plough's upturning. Grain ran up in long rippled ridges from Prospect, where the birches gleamed silver, across the wide dip of basin and over its fringing rise, into the luminous blueness of the sky. That was man's work, and man at Prospect worked unusually hard, for it was not his part there to plough where others had also sown, but to grapple with the wilderness, and subdue it, in fulfilment of the charge given him when the waters dried. The wilderness was there, leagues of it, but it required a stout heart and a steadfast toil to break it and cover it with red-gold wheat when wheat was a drug upon a falling market.

Eveline Annersly, faded and frail, was dainty still. As she sat smiling in the waggon, with the sunlight lying warm on her beautiful hands, she was a part of the colour scheme in her soft, grey-tinted draperies. Some women of the cities would have been a blotch on it. She was the figure of tranquil autumn when the wealth of fruits had gone, but her companion with the crimson lips and dusky eyes was spring, when as yet Nature is only stirring and has not awakened to riotous life at the burning kiss of the sun. Eveline Annersly realised this vaguely, and at times felt a thrill of concern, for she knew there was fire beneath that cold exterior. When the awakening should come, much would depend upon whether the sudden untrammelled growth of the girl's nature would cling for warmth and shelter to the man who was her husband. [Pg 123]

In the meanwhile, she watched the toiling teams coming on across grey grass and golden stubble in echelon. Men sat above the horses' heads on the driving-seats of the big gang-ploughs, and from amidst the curling brown clods came the twinkling flash of steel. The men had brown faces, and some of them bare, brown arms. Sun and wind had burned and beaten them and their garments to the colour of the soil they sprang from. They seemed almost a part of it, as they and the patient beasts did their share in the great, harmonious scheme which in return for the sweat of effort gives man bread to eat. This was not English farming, mixed and variable, but an unlocking of Nature's long-stored wealth in mile-long furrows that should fling the golden wheat by trainload and shipload on the markets of the world. Even Eveline Annersly, who was not greatly interested in agriculture, could realise that.

"It is a tremendous farm," she said. "We have nothing like it in England. The length of those furrows appeals to one's imagination. How big is it, Carrie?" [Pg 124]

The girl smiled a trifle languidly. "I really don't know," she said. "Charley has told me, but I never could remember things like that. He seems rather proud of having broken—I believe that is the right word—most of it out of the prairie. In fact, he is easily content. To break so many acres every year seems his one object in life. I don't think it's anybody's. Presumably, it's a question of temperament. My husband appears to like his occupation, and absorbs himself in it."

"Which, of course, is just as you would have it?"

The girl made a little half-petulant gesture. "Oh," she said, "I suppose so. I naturally did not expect Charley Leland and I would have many mutual interests when I married him. It would have been in several respects a trifle ridiculous. Still, he is, in his own way, very good to me."

"So I should have fancied"; and Eveline Annersly's eyes twinkled. "Did it ever occur to you that he might have expected a good deal from you?"

A flicker of colour showed in Carrie's cheek. "In that case, he, at least, shows no sign that he misses anything. As you know, we scarcely see him for two or three days together every now and then. I believe these teams are in the field by six in the morning, and it usually is dark when he comes in again."

"I wonder if you quite realise the restraint and self-denial implied by a life of that kind? After all, your husband is probably no fonder of wearing himself out than most other men. Presumably he has a purpose, or finds it necessary."

She stopped a moment, and smiled in a curious fashion as she glanced at her companion. "I suppose you have heard that they are building a new peach-house and vinery at Barrock-holme?" [Pg 125]

A bright crimson spot burned for a moment in Carrie's cheek. "I hadn't," she said, with a trace of bitterness. "Jimmy, of course, never writes, and even Alice seems to have forgotten me. In fact, I don't suppose there is one of them who ever gives me a thought now. Aunt Eveline, you are to

stay here for ever so long."

Mrs. Annersly nodded reassuringly. "Of course, my dear," she said. "As you perhaps know, it is a good deal your father's fault that I am reduced to living on my friends, and I really think some of the money he is spending on the peach-houses should have come to me. I have been inclined to wonder where he got it."

Carrie Denham was usually reposeful, but a trace of the confusion she felt showed itself in her face. Eveline Annersly understood her as well as she understood herself, and, being aware of this, she stood less upon her guard.

"Oh," she said, "I think you know. It is a little hard to bear, isn't it? Have they always been the same?"

"One would almost fancy so. Henry Annersly was well off when he married me, and everybody knows I have scarcely a penny. Where the rest has gone only Branscombe Denham knows, though I'm not even sure that he does. No doubt he didn't intend to lose it, but money won't stay with him. And he never even writes to you?"

Carrie laid a hand upon her arm. "Aunt," she said, "stay with us altogether. Charley likes you— and I can't let you go."

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The little lady's eyes grew gentle, but there was a faint smile in them. "My dear, I think I know what you are feeling, but, after all, you deserve it, and I'm not so very sorry for you. I'm going to make your husband stop and speak to me."

Their team stood stamping impatiently on the virgin sod, as Leland came up foremost of the long line of men and beasts. He was sitting upright on the driving-seat of a great machine, dressed in an old blue-jean shirt that was open at his sunburnt throat, with a wide grey hat on his head. His arms were bare to the elbow, corded, hard, and brown, and his face was the deep colour of the clods that rolled away in long waves beneath the three-fold shares. Four splendid horses plodded in front of him, and the stain of the soil and the same stamp of enduring strength was on him and them. He pulled the team up, and, springing down, came towards the waggon with his hat in his hand.

"You are going to the railroad?" he said.

"Yes," said Mrs. Annersly. "Carrie wants some things, but I understand we are to stay the night at Mrs. Custer's on the way."

"Well," said Leland, "I may see you there. There are some new harrows and seeders I have to wire about, but I don't expect to get in until daylight to-morrow."

"You are going to drive all night?"

"I may get an hour's sleep before I go. You see, I have to be back by noon to-morrow. Our summer is short, and there is a good deal to do. The grain that goes in late is quite often frozen."

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He pointed as if in explanation to the great sweep of furrows that ran back narrowing all the way to where Prospect nestled like a doll's house beneath its bluff. With a great trampling, two other teams came up just then. They went by amidst a ripping and crackling of fibres as the prairie opened up beneath the gleaming shares, and Leland nodded with a little quiet smile.

"Oh, yes," he said; "little time to do it in, and a good deal to do. Some of us were born to feel that way."

"Not all," said Eveline Annersly. "There are, as you know, men who waste their substance to while the day away. You are not that sort. Perhaps it's fortunate for you."

Leland smiled again. "I don't quite know. There's a great order and system that runs things, though I can't quite get the hang of it—I haven't time. Every man works in this country, as all Nature does. Those little grasses have been ten thousand years building up the black loam I'm making wheat of. The mallard, the brent goose, and the sandhill crane—you can see them coming up from the south in their skeins and wedges all day long—have to hunt their food from the shores of the Caribbean to the Pole. Well, one feels there must be a balance struck some day, and the men who don't do anything are having the soft things now."

He laughed good-humouredly, and stroked one of the horses that turned its head to nibble affectionately at his shoulder. "I'll be sorry for this by and by, but you have a habit of making me give myself away."

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"Then we will be practical. Are you going to sow all that ploughing?"

"I am. I expect to break two hundred acres more. There are folks who want the wheat, and we'll feed the world some day."

"But wheat is going down."

"It is," and Leland's face grew a trifle hard. "No bottom to the market, apparently. That's why I'm buying new machines and cutting things down and down. We must have everything that can save or earn a dollar at Prospect now."

Carrie Leland was struck by something in her husband's face. It was a comely face, as well as

forceful, clean-skinned in spite of its deepness of tint, and there was a clearness in the steady eyes that is only seen in those of such men as he. There was also in his features a suggestion of endurance and optimism that, in fact, was strongest in the time of stress and struggle. Sun and wind, fruitful soil and barren, nipping frosts, drought and devastating hail, all these were things to be grappled with or profited by with equal willingness. He and his kind in new countries give without stint all they have been given, from the sweat of tense effort each and every day to the smiling courage that cuts down hours of rest and goes on sowing when seasons are adverse and markets fall away; and there is, in turn, usually set upon them plainly the symbol of man's dominion over the material world. The patient beasts that toiled with him recognised it, and again one of them muzzled his shoulder and caught at his arm.

"And," said Mrs. Annersly, "if the market still goes down?"

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Leland laughed an optimist's soft laugh. "Then we will go under, I and the rest. That is, for a time. Nothing can stop us long, and we will start again. Carrie, I am thankful, is provided for."

He struck the horse with the palm of his hand. "I have been keeping you, and there is a good deal to do."

The big team stamped and strained; he swung himself into the driving-seat, and, with a crackling of fibres, the great plough rolled away. Mrs. Annersly smiled as Carrie shook the reins.

"If I were twenty years younger, I almost think I should fall in love with your husband," she said. "There is a breadth of view and forcefulness Reggie Urmston could never attain even in his simplicity, and his egotism becomes him. It's the quiet assurance of a man who knows what he can do, and rather thinks that he is doing a good bit. He takes all the risk, and you are provided for. Carrie, do you know what that man gave, or lent—it's much the same thing—to your father?"

"No," said Carrie, with the spot of colour once more in her cheek. "He would never tell me, and how could I ask him? It is a hateful subject—why should you mention it?"

Mrs. Annersly looked out over the prairie, a curious smile in her eyes.

"Your husband is cutting down even his hours of sleep," she said. "He is driving in forty miles to the railroad when his work is done to-night, while Branscombe Denham is building peach-houses at Barrock-holme."

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Carrie flushed crimson, and flicked the team with the whip. "You," she said, "are the only friend I have, and yet you sometimes take a curious pleasure in tormenting me. Do you expect me to turn against my own flesh and blood?"

"We have it on good authority that the wife should cleave to her husband, and they are one. There are, of course, people nowadays, and probably always have been, who think they know better."

The girl caught her breath. "Ah," she said, "you don't quite understand. If he were in difficulties I would face them with him cheerfully, but he would never let me. It was not said in bitterness, but when he told you I was provided for, it hurt me. Why should I be safe, who helped to ruin him?"

Eveline Annersly glanced at her with gravely questioning eyes. "My dear, I rather fancy you have almost thrown a great treasure away."

"Whether the thing was of great value I do not know, and it is scarcely likely I shall ever know. I certainly threw it just as far as I was able to, and, though I do not know whether I was wise or not, it is done, and there is no use in being sorry."

Then she swung the whip again, and sent the light waggon flying headlong down a long grassy slope. Mrs. Annersly found it advisable to hold on, and in any case she had said her say. Her words must lie with the rest she had dropped, until in due time they should bear their fruit. Eveline Annersly was old enough to be somewhat of an optimist too.

In the meanwhile, Leland went on with his ploughing, and, save for an hour's halt at noon to rest the teams, and for the six o'clock supper, toiled until a wondrous green transparency, through which the pale stars peeped, hung over the prairie. Then, when the cold clear air was invigorating as wine, he led the weary beasts to the stables, and, after walking stiffly to the homestead, flung himself into a chair, aching and drowsy.

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"Jake," he said to the man who was busy in the room, "I'll want some coffee in an hour or so. Make it black and strong."

Then Gallwey came in, and they sat for an hour going over a file of accounts from which Leland made extracts on a sheet. He laid it down at last, and pointed to a bundle of papers on a dusty shelf.

"I was worrying over them before I slept last night, and I'm no wiser now," he said. "The one thing certain is that wheat is going down, and what it will touch next harvest is rather more than any man can tell. One has too many climates from California to New Zealand to reckon with. If we stop right now and sow, we'd come out just clear as the market stands. I had expected to have quite a pile in hand, but with the drop in values the bank balance against me needed considerable meeting."

"It certainly did. I was a trifle astonished when you cabled me to arrange for the credit at

Winnipeg. You were, in view of your usual habits, singularly extravagant for once."

"I was," and Leland laughed somewhat harshly. "Still, under the circumstances, it wasn't quite unnatural. Anyway, we have wiped it out, and it has crippled me for the next campaign."

Gallwey asked no injudicious questions, but he wondered how his comrade, who had distinctly inexpensive tastes, had got rid of all the money he had apparently spent in England. Mrs. Leland was not an extravagant woman, so far as he was aware.

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"The question is, how we should meet a further drop," he said.

"That's not very difficult, unless the drop is too big. We have for fixed charges the upkeep of this homestead, besides wages, and the feeding of the boys we can't do without, and the working horses. That's not going to alter more than a little, anyway. Well, we have the seed, and there are broken horses on the run, so it's going to cost us just a few teamsters' wages, and the threshing to put oats in on as many extra acres as we can break. You see, we get a bigger crop on much the same cost."

"And the fall breaking?"

"Wheat," said Leland. "Every acre."

Gallwey drew in his breath. He knew his comrade's boldness, but this was almost incredible. Cautious men were already holding their hand, but Leland purposed to sow more freely than ever.

"It will be a huge crop," he said. "About the biggest that was ever raised in this country. Now, of course, within a margin, there's a good deal in your notion in increasing the ratio of production to dead charges, but, after all, you can't sow a third as much again without its costing you something. Well, if the price drops far enough to make that a loss?"

Leland laughed again. "Then," he said, "it will be one of the biggest smashes ever known in this country; but nobody's going to lose very much when they've taken the land and stock from me. It's tolerably steep chances, but they're all on me."

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Gallwey's uneasiness showed itself in his face. The magnitude of the risk almost dismayed him, but while he sat silent Leland made a little gesture.

"Tell Jake to bring that coffee in, and see the waggon's ready," he said. "I'll be off, and let the team go easy. They'll put me on to the wire at the depot at five o'clock when the stopping freight comes through. I should be back by noon. You'll start every man as usual."

He drank the bitter coffee to keep himself awake, and climbed into his waggon, while Gallwey shook his head as he watched him jolt away into the shadowy prairie.

"It's a big thing, almost too big for any other man," he said. "It was the confounded bank balance against him that drove him into it. I wonder how he spent all that money, or if Mrs. Leland knows."

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CHAPTER XII

LELAND'S PROTEST

There were two breakfasts served in the Occidental Hotel, which, dilapidated and weather-scarred, stands at the foot of the unpaved street of a desolate little town beside the railroad track. Most men commence their work early in the prairie country, so the first meal was laid at six; but there was another from eight to nine when a train came in. This was a somewhat unusual concession to the needs of the few passengers who alighted there, because throughout most of the Northwest no self-respecting hotel cook would prepare a meal out of the fixed hours, not even for a cabinet minister or a railroad director. Nor would the proprietor vary a dish, for in his estimation what suffices the plainsman is quite good enough for anybody else.

The table had just been cleared when a small and select company of men who had nothing in particular to do pulled their chairs up to the stove, on which as many of them as could find room put their feet. It had not been lighted that morning, or black-leaded for many days, but habit was strong in them. There are, even in countries where most men are hard workers, a few who spend their lives lounging on hotel verandahs and sitting round the stove. Nobody unused to it would, in all probability, have cared to linger there, for there are few places of entertainment so wholly desolate and uninviting as the general room of the average prairie hotel.

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Its walls were obviously made of dressed boards, and had even borne a coat of paint at one time; but they were bare and dirty now. Two lonely German oleographs of more than usually barbaric type hung on rusty nails. Cigar-ends and burnt matches littered the uncarpeted floor. Benches without backs to them ran along either side of the uncovered table. The rest of the furniture consisted of the rusty stove and a few chairs, which the loungers monopolised. Two of the group

wore store-clothing, with trousers so tight that one wondered how they ever got them on, and two wore blue jeans in sad need of patching. They had rough, dark faces, relieved by no sign of amiability or unusual intelligence; but they could talk. Loafers and tramps usually can.

Outside the open window, bright sunshine flooded the verandah, and fell upon the bare frame-houses across the way. A couple of light waggon, with the mire of the spring thawing not yet washed off them, passed clattering and jolting among the ruts. The streets of a prairie town usually resemble a morass when the frost breaks up. When they had gone, a police trooper swung by on a spume-flecked horse, with the dust of several leagues' journey thick on his trim uniform. Then there was silence again until one of the loungers looked up from the greasy paper he was reading.

"Wheat still going down," he said. "There's no bottom to the market, or, if it had one, it's dropped out. Our boss farmers are going to feel it if things go on like this; but nobody's going to be sorry for them. They figure they own the country already." [Pg 136]

"I hear Leland of Prospect is ploughing the same as if wheat was going up," said another man.

The third of the party shook his pipe out, and pursed up his face, which was not an attractive one, into an expression of pitying contempt.

"Leland's a blame fool, and always was," he said. "I once worked for him. It's the way the market went with him made him what he is. That, and nothing else."

"Why'd you quit Prospect, Jasper?" asked the remaining comrade, and the others grinned.

A vindictive gleam crept into the man's eyes. "Well," he said, "I've no use for being bossed by that kind of man, and one day I up and told him what I thought of him. There was considerable trouble before I walked out. Anyway, between the market and the English girl he's married, he's fixed just now."

"She's flinging his money away?" asked somebody.

"With both hands, and too stuck on herself to be civil to him. They're made like that in the Old Country. Leland's no more to her than the hired man, one of the boys told me."

"Well, why'd she marry him?"

"For his money. That's a good enough reason, and it's quite likely there was another one. Girls like her have got to marry somebody over there, and the men with money are kind of particular. I guess it's not astonishing. If you got hold of an English paper, it's full of their goings-on." [Pg 137]

"That's all right," said one of the others in tight store-clothes. "Still, until they're married, they've got to be careful. Afterwards, it don't so much matter. Unless all's quite straight, buyers hold off, and the figure comes down."

"It's quite easy guessing that's what was wrong with Mrs. Leland. What else would a girl with her looks make sure of him for? Charley Leland comes along with his money, and they plant her right on to him. It's even betting she goes off with another man if the market breaks him."

He stopped abruptly as his neighbour drove an elbow into his ribs, and his mouth gaped open as he dropped his feet from the stove. Then the others moved uneasily in their chairs, for a man stood in the doorway regarding them with a singularly unpleasant smile.

"Stand right up, Jasper, you—hog!" he said.

Jasper sat still, glancing at the others, as though he felt that, while none of them appeared in any haste to do so, it was their duty to support him, until one evidently remembered that there were, after all, four of them.

"He's sitting where he is, Charley Leland," he said. "Nobody asked you to hang round listening, and if you don't like our talk you can go outside again."

Leland showed no sign of having heard him. "Get up," he said, "and tell them you're a liar."

Jasper sat still. He was tolerably active and muscular, or he would never have worked at Prospect. But there was a dangerous look in Leland's eyes. His quiet incisiveness was portentous. Realising that his comrades expected something of him, Jasper managed to retort. [Pg 138]

"Oh, go home!" he said. "I guess you've plenty of trouble there without making any here."

In another moment Leland had crossed the room and swung him to his feet. Nobody was very clear about what happened during the next few seconds. There is, however, a certain animal courage in every man who has lived by bodily toil, and Jasper, who had also a vindictive temper, did all he could. When he had once felt Leland's hand, he clinched with him, and, reeling locked together, they fell with a crash against the table and overturned one of the benches. Then, gasping, panting, floundering, and striking when they could, they went swaying towards the door, while Jasper's friends howled encouragingly, and men, attracted by the uproar, ran out of the opposite store. Foot by foot they neared the verandah, and when Leland, gasping with passion, made a supreme effort, they staggered out into it.

There was a crowd below it now, and they set up a shout as Leland's grasp sank lower down the other man's hollowing back. Jasper, it seemed, was not altogether a favourite of theirs. After that

there was silence for another moment or two, while the two men swayed and strained with scuffling feet, until one of them suddenly relaxed his hold, and, reeling backwards, plunged down the verandah stairway. He struck a rail as he did it, and, overturning, came down headlong in the unpaved street. Somebody dragged him to his feet, and he stood still a moment, hatless, with the dust upon his flushed face, and his jacket rent, gasping with futile rage. Then he slunk away through the gap that was opened up for him.

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Leland leant somewhat heavily on the rails above. The veins were swollen on his forehead, blood trickled down his chin from one of his bleeding lips, and his face was dark with rage. Altogether, he was not exactly an attractive spectacle. Raising himself stiffly, he disappeared into the hotel, from which three other men made their way with as much haste as was compatible with any show of dignity. A light waggon had stopped unnoticed just outside the crowd.

A few minutes earlier Carrie Leland and Mrs. Annersly had driven across the railroad track on their way to the dry-goods store, and, as the waggon jolted in the ruts, the girl pointed to the town with a little gesture of repugnance.

"Could one well imagine anything less attractive than this?" she said. "Still, I believe the desolate place is looked upon as a rising city, and they are actually proud of it."

Eveline Annersly glanced up the single street with a twinkle in her eyes. It somewhat resembled a ploughed field, though the ruts and ridges the wheels had made were crumbling into dust. Above it ran a rickety sidewalk of planks, by means of which foot passengers could escape the mire in spring; and crude frame-houses, destitute of paint or any attempt at adornment, rose from that in turn. The fronts of most of them were carried sufficiently high to hide the pitch of sloped roof, so that they resembled squares of timber pierced by little windows. Above the topmost of the latter there usually ran a blatant but half-obliterated commendation of the wares sold within, for in the rising prairie town every house is, as a rule, either a store or a hotel.

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"Well," she said, "one could scarcely call it picturesque, but we have colliery and other industrial villages at home that are not very far behind it."

Carrie laughed. "Still, we have the grace to attempt to justify them on the score of necessity, while they hold this place up as a model and a sign of progress. It is a barbarous country."

"Including Prospect, too?"

"Of course! Still, Prospect makes no pretence of civilisation. It is part of the prairie, and nobody could expect much from it."

"Or of those who dwell in it?"

A little tinge of colour showed in the girl's cheek. "Well," she said with faint scorn, "I don't mind admitting that, too. They are a distinctly primitive people."

Mrs. Annersly said nothing further. She had her fancies respecting the reason for the girl's bitterness, and did not think that her marriage accounted for all of it. This was, in a way, as she would have it. She sat silent until Carrie pulled the team up close to the dry-goods store. A crowd was collecting in front of it, and they could get no further. While they sat there, a clamour broke out, and amidst a sound of scuffling, two men reeled across the verandah of the hotel opposite them. Their faces were not at first visible, and Carrie smiled contemptuously when the crowd encouraged them as they grappled with each other.

"That," she said, "is evidently considered the correct thing when Western gentlemen have a difference of opinion. You will notice that nobody makes any attempt to put an end to it. After all, since they cannot keep their brutality under restraint, there is something to be said for the use of pistols."

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In another moment one of the men brought his fist down with a dull thud upon the other's half-concealed face, and a little spark of scornful anger crept into the girl's eyes.

"It is a little disgusting, but we cannot get on without driving over somebody, and it would be a trifle absurd to have to go away again," she said. "What brutes men of their kind are!"

"Still, there is something to admire in their brutality," said her companion. "That man has both lips cut open. One would have fancied the blow would have stunned him, but he seems to be disregarding it, and is holding on."

She stopped a moment, with a little catching of her breath. "Ah," she said, "there will be no more of it."

One of the men loosed his hold and reeled down the stairway. Then for the first time they saw the face of the other clearly as he leant upon the rails. It was not wholly pleasant to look at, for there was passion in it, and blood trickled from the swollen lips. Carrie's hands tightened convulsively on the reins as she urged the team forward. Her cheeks were almost colourless, but she met Eveline Annersly's eyes steadily, and her voice had a bitter ring in it.

"Yes," she said, "it is my husband. No doubt his comrades would expect me to be pleased with him."

She stopped a moment and pulled the team up again. "I wonder if you can guess what it will cost me to go into that store, but I am going. After all, it would be a little absurd for Charley Leland's

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wife to be particular."

Mrs. Annersly's face was compassionate. "My dear," she said, "he had probably a reason for it."

"Of course!" said Carrie, languidly. "No doubt they differed over the points of a steer, or one of them was too attentive to the waiting-maid. I believe they have two at the Occidental."

She swung herself down, ignoring the hand of a man who had seized the reins, and, when Mrs. Annersly had descended, went into the big store. She was perfectly conscious that everybody was watching her, but she made her purchases with a cold serenity, and then drove away. She did not inquire for Leland, and was unaware that the object on the verge of the prairie was his waggon. Had she known it, she would have held her team in a little, for she had not the least desire to overtake him. This, however, was scarcely likely, for it was a long way to Prospect, and she intended to break the journey for an hour or so at an outlying farm to which the trail turned off in a league or two.

In the meanwhile, Leland drove on as fast as his weary team could go, until he reached the crossing of the ravine where Sergeant Grier had waylaid the outlaws. The trail dipped in sharp twists between the birches into the hollow, and he had raised himself a trifle on the driving-seat to swing the team round a bend when one side of the waggon dropped suddenly beneath him. In another moment he went out headlong, and, coming down heavily on his shoulder, lay as he fell, half dazed for a time. When he pulled his scattered senses together, he saw that the team had stopped and that one of the waggon wheels lay not far away from him. He rose with difficulty, feeling very sore and very dizzy, but, finding that he could walk, picked the wheel up. The brass cap of the hub had gone, and so had the nut which locked the bush on the axle. He had put a new one on not long before, and felt sure it had not come off of itself, as he remembered how tightly it had fitted. Still, it was evident that, if anybody had loosened it, the sudden strain upon the wheels as the waggon swung round the bend might have jarred it off, even after it had held that far.

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That question could wait. Rolling the wheel downhill, he attempted to put it on the hub. An unloaded prairie waggon is usually so light that a strong man can lift one side of it, but Leland was badly shaken by his fall. Indeed, he sat down more than once, gasping and dripping with perspiration, before he accomplished it. It was a mighty task for any man to attempt after a long day's ploughing, a night spent upon the trail, and a sixty-mile drive.

Although he was bothered with a distressing headache, and found that a branch had scored his cheek, nevertheless, when he had fitted on another nut from the tool-box in the waggon, he drove ahead, reaching Prospect almost as worn out as the team. Still, after a bite of food, he climbed up into the driving-seat of the big gang-plough. Summer is short in the Northwest, and the wheat that goes in late runs a risk of freezing, so he needed in his struggle the efforts of every man he could get. He drove the threefold furrow through the ripping sod until at last the copper sun dipped below the prairie's verge. Then, leaving his team to the men, he went back to the house, too weary to carry himself erect. The birches swayed in a cold green transparency, the crisp air had vim in it, but the weary man noticed nothing as he plodded, heavy-eyed, through the crackling stubble.

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He had just finished his lonely supper, and was sitting, dressed as when he came in, with the dust of the journey on him, and smears of the soil upon his heavy boots and leggings, when his wife, who apparently did not know he was there, entered the room. She started a little as she saw him, and Leland drowsily raised his hand to the raw red scar on his face. He had not remembered that his lips were twice their natural size and very unpleasant to look at, though they pained him.

"It doesn't amount to much," he said deprecatingly. "I've been too busy to fix it. I got thrown out of my waggon."

Carrie became rigidly erect, a sparkle of indignation in her eyes.

"That is really a little unnecessary," she said coldly. "I didn't presume to trouble you with any inquiries."

Leland looked at her, as though puzzled, with half-closed eyes. "They wouldn't have been unnatural in the case of a man who was flung headlong out of his waggon."

"One excuse will no doubt serve as well as another. The difficulty is that I happen to have some idea as to how you got your injuries."

The man rose wearily. "I have the pleasure of telling you that I was thrown out coming down the ravine."

"And I," said Carrie coldly, "was at the settlement at the time you furnished everybody with that interesting spectacle on the hotel verandah. I don't wish to be unduly fastidious, but hitherto, so far as I know, at least you have not taken the trouble to deceive me wilfully."

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Leland turned towards her with his cut lips pressed together, and his scarred face grim and hard, making a little gesture of weariness.

"Well," he said, "I guess it doesn't matter. I don't suppose I could make you think anything but hard of me."

He stopped a minute, and then laughed. "I have faced the world alone so far, and held my own with it. I suppose there is no reason why I shouldn't go on doing it."

"I believe that is, after all, what most men have to do," said Carrie. "I shall endeavour to be as small a burden on you as I can manage."

Then she turned and left him; but, as had happened on other occasions, her heart smote her in spite of her anger, for he looked shaken and very weary and lonely in the big, desolate room.

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CHAPTER XIII

CARRIE ABASES HERSELF

The warm spring day was over. In that land of contrasts, where there is no slow melting of season into season, it is often hot while the last snow-drifts linger in the shadows of the bluffs. Carrie and Mrs. Annersly were sitting by an open window of Carrie's sitting-room. The sun had gone, but, as usual at that season, a filmy curtain of green overhung the vast sweep of prairie that had shaken off its hues of white and grey for the first faint colour of spring. Above hung a pale, sickle moon, and down the long slope, over which the harrow-torn furrows ran, lines of men and weary teams were plodding home. Round the rest of that half of the horizon, the prairie melted into the distance imperceptibly—vast, mysterious, shadowy, under a great tense silence—while the little chilled breeze that came up had in it the properties of an elixir.

The thin-faced woman who lay in Carrie's big chair was not looking at the prairie. She had watched the pageant of the seasons too often before, and to her and her husband they had usually meant only a variation in the ceaseless struggle which had left its mark on both of them. In that country, man has to contend with drought, and harvest frost, and devastating hail, for it is only by mighty effort and long endurance that the Western farmer wrests his bare living from the soil. When seasons are adverse, and they frequently are, a heavy share of the burden falls upon the woman, too.

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Mrs. Custer had borne hers patiently, but her face, which still showed traces of refinement, was worn, and her hands and wrists were rough and red. While Thomas Custer toiled out in the frost and sunshine from early dawn to dusk to profit by the odd fat year, or more often, if it might by feverish work be done, to make his losses good, she cooked and washed and baked for him and the boys, a term that locally signifies every male attached to the homestead. She had also made her own dresses, as well as some of her husband's clothes, and darned and patched the latter with cotton flour-bags. Yet the ceaseless struggle had not embittered her, though it had left her weary. Perhaps it is the sunshine, or something in the clean cold airs from the vast spaces of the wilderness, for man holds fast to his faith and courage in that land of cloudless skies.

It was the rich, dark curtains, the soft carpet one's feet sank into, the dainty furniture, the odds and ends of silver, and the few good etchings at which the faded woman glanced with wistful appreciation. She had been accustomed to such things once, but that was long ago, and she had never seen on the prairie anything like Carrie Leland's room. With a wee, contented smile she turned to the girl.

"It was so good of you to have me here, although if Tom's sister from Traverse hadn't promised to look after him I couldn't have come," she said. "It is three years since I have been away, and to know that one has nothing to do for a whole week is almost too delightful now."

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Eveline Annersly's eyes twinkled. "I'm rather afraid that some of us have that consolation, if it is one, all our lives," she said. "They keep you busy at the Range?"

"From morning to night; and now we must work harder than ever, with one of the boys in Montreal and wheat going down. One feels inclined to wonder sometimes if the folks who buy our cheap flour would think so much of the quarter-dollar on the sack if they knew what it costs us."

She stopped a moment with a little wistful smile. "I'm afraid this is going to be a particularly lean year for a good many of us. Last year I was busy, though I had a Scandinavian maid, but I shall be single-handed now, and the grocery bill must come down, too. It's quite hard to pare it any closer when everything you take off means extra work, and, with it all, the boys must be fed."

Mrs. Annersly glanced at Carrie, who, for some reason, did not meet her gaze.

"I think you mentioned that you came from Montreal," she said. "You must have found it very different on the prairie."

"I certainly did. I had never done anything useful or been without all the money I wanted when I married Tom Custer, who had gone out a year earlier. My friends were against it, and they would probably have been more so had they seen the Range as it was then. The house had three rooms to it, and one was built of sod, while all the first summer the rain ran in. Still we made out together, and got on little by little, struggling for everything. A new stove or set of indurated ware meant weeks of self-denial. Now I seem to have been pinching a lifetime, though I am only forty; but Tom was always kind, and I do not think I have ever been sorry."

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She lay still, nestling luxuriously in the softly padded chair, and through her worn face and hard

hands the blurred stamp of refinement once more shone. It was twenty years since she had turned away from the brighter side of life, and, though she did not expect compassion, Eveline Annersly felt sorry for her. There was also a certain thoughtfulness in Carrie Leland's expression, which seemed to suggest that a comparison was forced upon her. Both of them realised that the wilderness is not subdued without a cost. Woman, it seemed, had her part in the tense struggle, too, and Mrs. Custer was one of the many of whom it can be said: "They also serve."

"Have you ever been home since you were married?" asked Carrie.

"Once," said Mrs. Custer, with a faint shadow in her face. "I never went again. The others were not the same, or perhaps I had changed, for they did not seem to understand me. My younger sisters were growing up, and they thought only of dances, sleigh-rides and nights on the toboggan-slides, as I suppose I did once. My dresses looked dowdy beside theirs, too, and they told me I was getting too serious. I felt myself a stranger in the house where I was born. One, it seems, loses touch so soon."

Again she stopped and laughed. "One night something was said that hurt me, and I think I lay awake and cried for hours as I realised that I could never quite bridge the gulf that had opened up between the rest and me. Then I remembered that Tom, who had worked harder than ever to raise the wheat that sent me there, wanted me always—and I went back to him."

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Her voice fell a little, and Carrie was touched by the faint thrill in it. She had seen Thomas Custer, a plain, somewhat hard-featured and silent man, and yet this woman, who she fancied had once been almost beautiful, had willingly worn out her freshness in coarse labour for him. Then a tiny flush crept into her face as she remembered that she, too, had a husband, one who gave her everything, and for whom she seldom had even a smile. She was not innately selfish. Indeed, she had shown herself capable of sacrifice. As she sat unobserved in the growing shadow, she sighed. She wondered whether they still remembered her at Barrock-holme, for, if they did, they had seldom written, and she reflected sadly that she had not Mrs. Custer's consolation, since there was nobody else who wanted her.

"You really believe this is going to be a lean year?" she said.

"I am afraid so. Still, it is scarcely likely to trouble you, except that your husband will have a good deal to face. Tom isn't sure he was wise in sowing so much, with wheat going down, and it seems he considered it necessary to quarrel with the rustlers, too. They are rather vindictive people, and it's a little astonishing they have left him alone, though Tom thinks they or their friends had something to do with what happened to his waggon. He met him driving home the day he was thrown out, and told me that Charley, who had evidently had a bad fall, looked very shaky."

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Carrie started. "He was thrown out of his waggon?"

"Of course! Didn't he tell you? Well, perhaps he would be afraid of its worrying you. It would be like Charley Leland, and here I have been giving him away."

Carrie was troubled by an unpleasant sense of confusion as she remembered that her husband had really told her, and what her attitude had been; but Mrs. Custer had more to say.

"Charley Leland is going to have his hands full this year. The fall in wheat is bad enough, and it is quite likely the rustlers will make trouble for him. Then he must fall out with a man at the settlement, who Tom says is in league with them. Perhaps I shouldn't have mentioned that, though I almost think it was the only thing he could do."

Carrie, seeing Mrs. Annersly look up sharply, controlled herself by force of will.

"Would you mind telling me why you think that?" she asked calmly.

Mrs. Custer appeared to be looking at her in astonishment. "You don't know? He hasn't told you that, either?"

"No," said Carrie quietly, "he certainly hasn't."

The woman in the big chair sat silent for several moments, and then made a little deprecatory gesture. "Even if your husband doesn't thank me for telling you, I think you ought to know. It appears from what Tom heard, two or three of the loungers at the hotel were talking about you. Charley came into the verandah and heard them."

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"Ah," said Carrie, with a sharpness in her voice that suggested pain, "so that was how it came about. No doubt half the people in the settlement know what they were saying?"

Once more Mrs. Custer appeared to consider. Like most of his friends, she believed in Charley Leland, and it was, of course, not astonishing that she was aware that his relations with his wife were not exactly all they should be. This to some extent roused her resentment, and, though she was inclined to like Carrie, she had half-consciously taken up her husband's cause against her.

"My dear," she said, "I scarcely think I could tell you, and I really don't believe many people know. Still, neither your husband nor the others appear to have noticed that the inner door of the room was open, and the man who keeps the hotel heard them. He told Tom that he wouldn't have expected anything else from Charley Leland."

Carrie leant forward a little in her chair. "I want you to tell me exactly what they said. It is right to my husband and myself that I should know."

"Then you will forgive me if it hurts you. They said you had only married him for his money, and he was no more to you than one of the teamsters. There was a little more I couldn't mention."

There was an uncomfortable silence for a few seconds, and Carrie knew, dark as it now was, that Mrs. Annersly was furtively watching her.

"Ah," she said, "then my husband came in?"

Mrs. Custer laughed softly. "I believe the loquacious gentleman was very sorry for himself before Charley had done with him." [Pg 153]

"Thank you," said Carrie, thoughtfully. "Now I think we will change the subject. Could you manage to light the lamp, Aunt Eveline? I can't very well get past you."

Mrs. Annersly, lighting the lamp, craftily led their visitor to talk of Montreal; for she thought Carrie had suffered enough for the present.

In the meanwhile, Leland, who had been driving the harrows all day, and had just come in, sat with Gallwey in the big room below. He had a blackened pipe in his hand, and his face was thoughtful. His torn jacket and coarse blue shirt fell away to the elbow from one almost blackened and splendidly corded arm. The man, like most of his neighbours at that season, was usually too weary with more than twelve hours' labour to change his clothes when he came in, for which there was, indeed, no great reason, since he seldom saw his wife or Mrs. Annersly in the brief hour between his work and sleep.

"Wheat's down another cent, with sellers prevailing," he said, pointing to several newspapers on the table. "It's 'most a pity I had fixed up to put in the big crop. Things are quiet in Russia, and that means a good crop; they've had rain in California, and the kind of season they wanted in Argentina, India, and Australia. It seems to me the whole thing's going to turn on the States' crop this year. From what I've been reading here, they're a little scared about sowing in the Dakotas and Minnesota. They'd swamp out all the markets if wheat jumped up just now."

"It shows very little sign of doing it," said Gallwey. "Things are going to be a little serious as it is. A short crop in the States would give values a fillip, but the trouble is that if they have frost or hail we are likely to get it, too." [Pg 154]

Leland smiled drily. "Well," he said, "if the market doesn't stiffen, we can only go under. It would hurt to give up Prospect, but it could be done. In the meanwhile, I've been wondering about that waggon. It took me quite a while to screw the lock-nut on with the big box-spanner, and the thing never loosened of itself."

"I don't think it did. The last time you drove in to the settlement, your waggon was standing probably four or five hours behind the Occidental. I think I'd try to find out if anybody borrowed one of Porter's spanners when I went in again. How long was it after you threw Jasper out, when you drove away?"

"About five minutes."

"Well, it's quite possible he did it before. I suppose you haven't asked yourself how Jasper makes a living. He never seems to be doing anything, and I believe it isn't difficult to buy whisky at the settlement. Thanks to our beneficent legislature, whoever keeps it makes an excellent profit."

Leland's face grew a trifle harder, and he closed one brown hand. "The same thing struck me, and I guess you're right. It seems I have a good deal against me this year. The market would have been bad enough without the rustlers."

Gallwey rose and laid a hand on his shoulder. "You can count on me, Charley, whatever comes along. There are others, too. It isn't only the whisky men who feel they have to get even with you. You'll get what you like to ask for, teams, men to harvest for you, and, though it's scarce in this country, even money." [Pg 155]

He turned away a trifle abruptly, and Leland felt a thrill of gratitude. He had many friends on the prairie, and knew the worth of them, though it did not occur to him that he had done quite sufficient to warrant their good-will. Just then he was most clearly sensible that there was much against him.

Presently Carrie came in, looking very dainty and alluring in an evening gown. She had not yet discarded all the social conventions to which she had been accustomed at Barrock-holme. Leland felt a stirring of his blood as he looked at her. He rose and stood waiting, as she watched him gravely, a faint flush in her cheeks.

"Charley," she said, and he thought how seldom she used his name, "I have a difficult thing to do, but it would not be honest to shirk it. I must ask you to forgive me for what I said when you told me about the waggon."

"Why?"

The colour grew in the girl's face. "Mrs. Custer has told me that her husband saw you."

Leland smiled somewhat bitterly. "You find it easier to believe Tom Custer than me?"

"Please wait. What could I think when you told me? I was at the settlement that morning, and saw

your cut lips when you stood on the verandah."

The man started a little, but he promptly recovered from his astonishment, and looked at her with twinkling eyes.

"Now I understand," he said. "You were a little disgusted with me. The men you are used to wouldn't have thrown any one they couldn't agree with out of a hotel."

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"No. Still, there are cases when the provocation may be too strong for one."

"It is quite often that way with me. I'm afraid I am a little short in temper."

He leant upon the table, as though he had nothing more to say, and Carrie recognised that he did not mean to tell her what had led up to the outbreak. Whether this was due to pride or generosity she did not know, but the fact made its impression upon her. Her husband was, it seemed, sure enough of his own purposes to disregard what others thought of him; but there was a certain sting in the reflection. A desire on his part to stand well in her estimation would have been more gratifying. Still, she overcame the slight sense of mortification.

"You haven't told me what the provocation was," she said.

"No," said Leland, with a little quiet smile. "It wouldn't be quite the thing to worry you with an explanation every time I lose my temper. I do it now and then."

"Ah," said Carrie, "don't you care, then, what I think of you? Still, in this case, I needn't ask you. Mrs. Custer told me that, too. That is why I felt I must ask you to forgive me for presuming to blame you. I want to be just, and I was in my wilfulness horribly far from being so."

"You want to be just? That was the only reason?"

The girl saw the tension in his face, and stood silent, swayed by a whirl of confused sensations. She would not admit there was another reason, though something in her nature clamoured for a breaking down of the restraint between them. She had looked down on this man and wantonly wounded him, while he had shown her what she realised was a splendid generosity and borne her scorn in silence. It was once more his independent silence that troubled her, and she felt just then that she would sooner have had him compel her to acknowledge that he was not what she had striven to think him.

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"Well," he said, a trifle sadly, "I suppose I must not expect too much."

The girl's heart smote her. She knew just what he wanted her to say, but she could not say it, and yet she meant to do all she had undertaken.

"There is a little more, and it must be said," she said. "I know part, at least, of what those men said of me."

She stopped, and, holding herself rigidly, though one hand which she had laid on the table quivered a little, looked at him steadily.

"If I could only prove them wrong, but I can't," she said.

A deep flush crept into Leland's face, and the veins rose swollen on his forehead, while he grasped her shoulder almost roughly.

"Do you know what you are saying?" he asked.

"That I married you because we were poor at Barrock-holme. It was a horrible wrong I did you—and you have made me ashamed."

The relief that swept into the man's face somewhat puzzled her, but she had seen the anger and suspense in it a moment earlier, and her heart throbbed painfully. After all, though she did not understand what had troubled him, it seemed that he did care very much indeed.

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"My dear," he said quietly, "if you think you have done me any wrong, it is wiped out now. Perhaps, some day, you will go a little further than you have done to-night, and I must try to wait for it. That is all I have to say, and this is becoming a little painful to both of us."

He turned slowly away, and Carrie moved towards the door, but, when she reached it, she stopped and looked back at him.

"One can be a little too generous now and then," she said.

Then the door closed, and Leland stood still, leaning on the table, with thoughtful eyes.

"I don't know if that was a lead or not, and I don't seem able to think just now," he said. "I'm not running Prospect, it's driving me, and I'm ground down mind and body by the load of wheat I'm carrying."

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CHAPTER XIV

THE OUTLAWS STRIKE BACK

The brief spring was merging suddenly, earlier even than usual, into summer, and it was a still, oppressive night when Leland sat, somewhat grim in face, in a mortgage and land broker's office at the railroad settlement. The little, dusty room, with its litter of papers and survey prints, was very hot, and Leland, who had just come in from the dusk, was a trifle dazed by the light the kerosene lamp flung down. He had in his hand two or three letters the broker had given him, and glanced at one of them moodily, only with difficulty fixing his attention on it. He had toiled with feverish activity that spring, and at last the strain was telling, for his head ached, and he felt limp and weary. It had, too, been dry weather ever since he put the first plough into the ground, and that night there was an oppressive tension in the atmosphere.

Macartney, the land-broker, sat opposite him, a gaunt, keen-eyed man, with a thin jacket over his white shirt. Leland knew him for an upright man, though nobody is supposed to be particularly scrupulous in the business he followed.

"You are looking a little played out," he said. "I can give you some ice and soda, but it's partly due to your own efforts that I've nothing else. Whisky can, I believe, be had, but, in the face of the fall in land and wheat, the figure the few men want who venture to keep it is prohibitive." [Pg 160]

He filled a tumbler from the fountain on the side-table, and dropped in a lump of ice. Leland drained it thirstily.

"I've been round since sun-up, and have driven forty miles," he said, putting down the empty glass. "I guess it's the weather, for a thing of that kind shouldn't have troubled me. Not a blade of wheat up yet, and the seed-beds all clods and dust. There are very few of us going to escape the frost in the fall."

Macartney nodded sympathetically. "If I come out a hundred cents on the dollar when harvest's over, it's rather more than I expect," he said. "My stake's in land and wheat, and I couldn't unload anything except at a smart loss just now. In the circumstances, it seems to me that Bruce is making you a reasonable offer."

"I'm not likely to raise on it from anybody else," and Leland frowned as he glanced at the letter. "Still, if I let him have the cattle, I can't stock the ranch again. They should have cleared me quite a few thousand dollars, if I could have held on, and sold them fat in the fall."

"If I were in your place and could hold on, I would. Still, you have to have some money in hand. The banks won't look at land, and I couldn't raise you anything on mortgage except at a crippling interest."

"That's just my trouble, I haven't got any cash."

The broker glanced at him reflectively. "Well," he said, "it's not my business, but you must have had a pile last year. Of course, you were over in the Old Country, but you could afford it, and you never struck me as an extravagant man." [Pg 161]

Leland smiled in a somewhat wry fashion. "I don't quite think I am, but that's not the question. I've got to have the money to go on with, and, as you say, I couldn't get it on a mortgage that wouldn't ruin me. Tell Bruce he can have the cattle, and, if he'll let me know when he wants them, we'll round them up for him. It's that or nothing, but I stand to lose 'most enough on the run to break me this year."

"From what you told me, if you hang on to the run, you'll have to let Prospect go."

Leland's face hardened. "Well," he said, "I guess I would, and that, if it has to be, is going to hurt me. If I stood as I did last fall, I could carry over, but now the market and the season are both against me. But I must be getting home. You'll fix it up with Bruce?"

The ostler from the Occidental was waiting outside with a hired horse, and Leland, swinging himself wearily into the saddle, rode down the unpaved street. A blaze of light shone out from the verandah of the little hotel, and he could hear the laughter of those inside and the hum of merry voices. Further on, somebody was playing a fiddle in a house the door and windows of which stood wide open. He sighed a little as he rode by. A year ago, he would have spent the night there or at the hotel, taking his part in the pointed badinage with keen enjoyment. His good-humour had been infectious then, and everybody had had a pleasant word for him; but things were different now. [Pg 162]

The market was going against him, the season was getting more unpropitious. If ruin could be staved off, it would be only by unceasing toil and Spartan self-denial. After working from sunrise, he had driven forty miles that afternoon, and there was the same distance still to be covered in the saddle. He might count himself fortunate if he reached Prospect in time for barely two hours' sleep before he must set about his work again. He had never spared himself, and he had no thought of doing so now, when every effort he could make was urgently necessary. Branscombe Denham's creditors had been, if not satisfied, at least pacified for a time with the money that would have seen him through, and Leland, who knew his man, smiled grimly as he recalled that Denham had termed it a loan.

There was nobody in the rutted street, the stores were closed, and only a single light burned in

the little wooden shed beside the railroad track. The place seemed deadly desolate, and Leland, whose physical weariness had reacted on his mind, shrank for once from the greater loneliness, as he rode out into the silent, empty waste. Save when the blue sheet-lightning fell with a sudden blaze, black darkness rested heavily upon the night. The drumming of his horse's hoofs rose with a jarring distinctness, the air was thick and hot, and the smell of sun-scorched earth was in his nostrils. A light, fibrous dust settled on his perspiring face.

The sod, green no longer, was turning white before its season, and broad cracks seamed its surface from want of moisture. He could remember only one or two springs that had been like this; and they, he recalled, had broken many a prairie farmer. Seed will not germinate under such conditions, and the prairie summer is usually quite short enough to ripen the crops. There was nobody to observe him, so he bent under the strain, riding slackly in his weariness, with all the vigour gone out of him. What his thoughts were, he could never quite remember. Indeed, he was not sure that he had had any definite thoughts at all, being conscious only of utter lassitude and dejection.

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The horse started in alarm whenever the blue radiance flashed athwart the prairie, showing here and there a clump of willows, or a birch bluff etched black against the brightness. Then darkness followed, and he felt his way by the sound the hoofs made on the sun-baked soil of the trail. He was astonished, on making the big bluff by the ravine, to hear a beat of hoofs among the trees he had not seen until he rode into the midst of them. There were evidently a good many horses, and it flashed upon him that only the rustlers would be riding that way in a body and at that hour of night. He had no pistol, nothing in fact, but a heavy riding quirt. This he grasped by the thinner end as he rode on. In his present mood, he would not have left the trail had he known absolutely that the outlaws had come there in search of him.

They were hidden in the blackness, but he could hear them calling to their horses as they climbed the trail out of the hollow, and he stiffened himself a little, shifting his hand on the bridle, and feeling for a firmer grip with his knees. As he did so, the gap between the trunks was filled with a blue flash, and he could plainly see the white faces of the foremost of the outlaws. The light lasted long enough to show that men and beasts were dripping with wet. Then a curious thing happened. Leland's grasp of the riding quirt suddenly relaxed, and he checked his horse.

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"You have had rain, boys?" he said.

"A shower," said a startled man, who had seen him for an instant. "More of it to the westwards—the creek's rising."

There was another blue flash, and Leland's horse plunged. As he swayed in his saddle, two, at least, of the others saw his face; but they stood still in the black darkness that followed, and he rode through the midst of them with a firm grasp on the bridle. Then he gave the startled horse the rein. A confused clamour rose from the blackness behind him as he swept across the bridge, and he felt that whimsical chance alone had saved him. Had he planned his moves with definite purpose, the thing he had done would have been impossible.

Reining in when he reached the level beyond the ravine, he sat listening. There was no sound of pursuit. As a big, warm drop splashed upon one hand, he started nervously. Then from out the silence came a soft murmur that rose in sharp crescendo. Suddenly a rush of rain smote his perspiring face. The patter swelled into a roar, and a heavy, steamy smell like that of a hothouse rose from the drinking earth. Leland felt his pulse quicken as the warm deluge washed his cares away. Its value could be calculated in hard cash, for it saved his wheat.

He rode for a while bareheaded, with the water trickling over him. Though he was physically very weary, the lassitude and dejection melted out of him. There was no longer a tension in the atmosphere, and he was an optimist again, vaguely thankful for the things he had and the strength to grapple with those against him. With that, a great tenderness towards his wife swept over him like a wave, and he remembered, not her scorn and bitter words, but that there was so much she must miss at Prospect. He had left her alone, neglected, while he thought only of his work, and, even though she cared nothing for him, he might in many ways have made her life pleasanter. He could, he reflected, do it yet, for ruin seemed remote, now the wheat was saved. The rain still beat his clothing flat against his tired limbs, but he rode on almost light-heartedly, with the mire splashing high about him, welcoming every drop.

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It was still dark when he reached Prospect, wet through and half-asleep, but, swinging himself wearily down from the saddle, he made shift to put the horse into one of the stables. There were more than one of them, for the buildings had been erected here and there as they had been wanted, and as the farm had grown. Letting himself into the silent house, and groping his way to his room, he shed his wet and muddy garments on the floor and crawled dead-tired into bed. He slept very soundly, for Nature would have her way, and it was seven in the morning when Carrie, who did not know he had returned, entered his room. Though she knew little of household management, she had, during the last month or two, been quietly assuming the direction of affairs at Prospect.

She started when she saw him, but it was evident that he was very fast asleep, so she stood for several minutes looking down on him. One arm was flung out on the coverlet, bare to the elbow, sinewy and brown. She noticed the hardness of the hand, and her heart grew soft towards him as she saw how worn his face was with the resolution melted out of it. The man looked so weary in his sleep. When she glanced round the room, his very clothes, from which the water had spread

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across the uncovered floor, were suggestive of the hard fight he had fought and the weariness it had brought him. There had been no care in his face at Barrock-holme. She, she reflected, had brought him trouble. At the thought, there came over her a feeling of disgust with herself and compassion for him. It was not love, perhaps, but it was, at least, regretful tenderness, and she drew nearer with a sudden impulse, the blood creeping into her cheeks. He lay very still, apparently fast asleep, and she knew that further trouble awaited him on waking.

Then the impulse, illogical as she felt it was, grew stronger, until it became uncontrollable, and she bent down swiftly and kissed his cheek. He made no sign, but she rose with her blood tingling, and, not daring to look back at him, slipped out of the room. She met Gallwey on the stairway, and he looked at her in amazement, for he had never before seen that colour in her face or that softness in her eyes.

"If one might be permitted to mention it, the loss of sleep and the alarm last night seem to have agreed with you," he said. "You are looking as fresh as the prairie after the rain."

Carrie laughed softly, and it seemed to the man that her voice was also gentler than usual. "I'm afraid I can't make you an equal compliment," she said. "You look very woe-begone."

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"I expect I do," and Gallwey made a little whimsical gesture. "In fact, I wish it was any other person's duty to inform your husband what has happened. I suppose I am in a way responsible, and his remarks are rather vigorous occasionally."

"You are not going to waken him now?"

"I'm afraid I must. The King's command, madam. I have already gone a little further than was advisable in giving him an extra hour."

"But," said Carrie, "you don't seem to remember that there is a Queen at Prospect, too. Let him sleep until nine o'clock. You have my dispensation."

Gallwey made her a little inclination, and it was more deferential than joking, though he smiled.

"With that, madam, I will risk my head," he said. "I wonder if I may dutifully mention that we have wanted a Queen for a long while—one who will rule."

Carrie felt her cheeks glow, and she was glad when he turned and went down the stairs in front of her.

It was two hours later when Gallwey, with some difficulty, and not a few misgivings, awakened Leland, but the latter's first indignation died away when his comrade mentioned why he had not done so earlier. Gallwey, who was Carrie Leland's devoted servant, contrived to hide his smile, though he had drawn his own inferences and was satisfied. By the time he had said all he had to say, Leland's face had, however, grown grim again, and that he was quiet was not a favourable sign.

"I will be down in five minutes, and come with you," he said. "One of the whisky boys or I would have needed burying if I had known of this last night."

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Ten minutes had passed when he and Gallwey walked towards the stables across the wire-fenced paddock. The rain had ceased, and bright sunshine was licking up the gleaming moisture from the sod, but Leland saw only a wide space of sodden ashes, and the blackened ruins of the log-stables, of which the roofs had fallen in. The birch-trunks that still stood were charred and tottering, and a little steam rose from them. They went in among them together. Leland stopped suddenly, with hands tight clenched and the veins on his forehead standing out, when he saw what lay among a mass of half-burnt and fallen beams.

"Four of them," he said hoarsely. "Brave old Bright, and Valerie. Many a long furrow have they ploughed for me. Voyageur and Blackfoot, too!"

He swung round fiercely. "Tom, I'd almost sooner the—hogs had crippled me. Teams I'd broke and driven year by year. They've done 'most as much for Prospect as I have. By the Lord, when next I run up against the boys who did it, there's going to be a reckoning. You are sure of what you tell me?"

Gallwey touched his arm. "Come and see."

They went out together, across the space of ashes that ran back several hundred yards from the stables. Then Gallwey stooped beside a half-burnt tussock of taller grass, and pointed to a little card of pasteboard sulphur matches. They were, as usual, joined together at the bottom of the card, and the heads had melted off them; but Gallwey, stooping, picked up a single half-burnt match, and fitted it to the place from where it had evidently been broken off.

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"I left them there for you to see," he said. "As a rule nobody ever finds out how a grass-fire starts, but I think the origin of this one is tolerably plain. You will, of course, have noticed that it is within the guard-furrows. Perhaps the fellow didn't remember the matches, or he may have left them as a hint. I suppose it is gratifying to feel that your enemy knows you intended it when you hurt him."

Gallwey's face hardened, and he went on:

"Jake wakened first, and we had the boys out in five minutes, but the fire was on the stables then.

We couldn't get the door open, either, and had to wait while one of them brought an axe. I don't know what jammed it, because, when I went back to see, it was burnt, but it never stuck fast before. Well, we did what we could, but we couldn't save the four horses you saw, and, if it hadn't been for the rain, we might have lost them all."

Leland, looking about him, noticed again that the fire had started just where the grass was tallest, and within the guard-furrows ploughed to cut the homestead off from the sweep of the prairie. This fire, it was very evident to him, had been started with a definite purpose that it had come very near accomplishing.

"We have everything against us this year," he said, and his brown face showed very hard and stern. "Still, by the Lord, if we have to go under, there's going to be a struggle first."

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CHAPTER XV

BENEFICENT RAIN

When Gallwey left him, Leland walked slowly through the bluff where the birches rustled softly under the caress of a warm, gentle breeze. There was a different note in their low murmur now, for the lace-like twigs were covered with slender leaves, and a new scent rose from the steaming mould. Leland noticed it vacantly, scarcely seeing the silver stems; for, susceptible as he was to all of Nature's moods, he was, at the time, bracing himself for the long struggle before him.

There was so much against him, and the loss of his horses had filled him with an overwhelming indignation against the men who had wantonly injured him. He was combative by nature, as every man with a strenuous purpose must necessarily be. With vindictive bitterness, he thought of the burnt and mangled beasts that had worked for him so well. Once more his lips set, and, brushing heedlessly through the bluff, he clenched one hard hand. Men and circumstances might prove too strong for him; but he would, at least, go on until he was crushed, and leave his mark upon his enemies before they brought him down.

Then, coming out from among the trees, he stopped with a little indrawing of his breath as he glanced at the ploughing. It had been, when he last saw it, a waste of clods rent into hot and dusty fragments, but now all the wide basin and long slope of rise were sprinkled with flecks of green, and he stood gazing at it with softening face and glowing eyes. The kindly rain had touched the parched and dusty soil, and the old familiar miracle had again happened.

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Life had emerged from darkness; the wheat was up, in token that, while man's faith may falter, and his hand grow slack, the great beneficent influences are strongest still, and seedtime and harvest shall not fail. As those who worked for him had cause to know, and as shrewd grain buyers in Winnipeg admitted, Leland was an essentially practical man; but there was in him, as there must be in the optimist, a vague recognition of the mysterious, upholding purpose that stands behind, and is partially revealed in the world of material things. He could drive the long furrow, he could rend the clods, but there was that in the red-gold wheat that did not come from them or him. It was the essence of life, a mystery and a miracle, his to control, or even to annihilate, but a thing he could never create.

He felt something of this while he stood there with the warm wind on his face. The bitterness fell from him with his cares. Hope is eternal, and it sprang up strong in him as his softening eyes wandered over the vast sprinkling of sunny green. The harvest would follow the sowing, and toil was indestructible. His courage, which, indeed, had never faltered, changed its mood. It was no longer the grim resolution of a desperate man, but a more hopeful and gentler thing. Then, and he was not astonished, for it only seemed the natural sequence of things, his wife came out from among the birches with a smile in her eyes.

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"I have come to look for you. Breakfast is ready, and I have been waiting ever so long," she said.

It was a trifling matter, but the man's heart beat faster than usual. It had not been her habit to rise in time to breakfast with him. As often happened when he felt the most, he could think of nothing apposite to say, and stood looking at her in silence.

"I was almost afraid to venture until I saw you," she said. "I had expected to find you angry. It wouldn't have been astonishing."

Leland laughed softly. "I'm afraid I was," he said "Still, it didn't seem to last when I saw the wheat was up, and it was bound to vanish when you came, anyway."

"Ah," said Carrie, with a faint warmth in her cheeks, "it's a long time since you have even tried to say anything of that kind to me. Well, I have something to say, and I would like you to believe it is not merely what you once called the correct thing. I am very sorry for what has happened."

"My dear, I think I know," and Leland smiled at her. "It was very good of you, and the only thing that was needed to make my worries melt away. I seem to feel I'm going to come out ahead of the market and the rustlers, now. Could anybody be afraid when he had seen the wheat?"

The girl turned and gazed with only partial comprehension at the vast sweep of green.

"Oh," she said, "I suppose it is a little wonderful. It looked so hopeless yesterday. I am glad one, at least, of your troubles has vanished, Charley."

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"And yours?"

"Am I supposed to have any?"

She spoke without bitterness, as though questioning his faculty of comprehension, and she saw the dark colour creep into his face. Still, it was not the hue of anger, and, stooping, he gently seized the hand that wore the ring.

"My dear," he said, "you must have many. I can feel it now, and, when I married you, I was, perhaps, doing wrong. How could one expect you to be content with such a man as I am?"

He stopped a moment, and smiled wistfully. "I almost think I know how the life you lead here must look to you. You can see it stretching out in front of you, all arid and hopeless, like those furrows yesterday. Still, now you see them green with promise. The rain has come."

"Ah," said Carrie; "still, the wheat was hidden there, and in some of us there are only weeds and tares, while, even if there is among them a little wholesome grain, who knows if the rain will ever come at all?" She looked up at him and hesitated. "Charley, do you feel that I have cheated you very badly?"

"How?"

"Oh, I suppose you will not admit it. One could thank you for that, but you know. Have I ever been a companion to you? Isn't your life harder than it was before?"

Leland's grasp of her hand grew tighter. "Well," he said, "there are times when one must talk, and I have felt that; but I felt, too, that, if I could wait, there would be a change."

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"I think you must have been always hopeful."

"Hope," said Leland gravely, "is a little like the germ in the wheat. It lies dormant; but, while its husk lasts, it will not die. I think," and he glanced back at the vast sweep of sprouting green, "I was like that dusty ploughing, waiting for the rain."

The girl was silent for a while, though she, too, was conscious of a curious stirring of her nature, which showed itself by the warmth in her cheeks. The man had, she felt, chosen a peculiarly fitting symbolism, for, when the beneficent rain had touched the arid clods, they had put on beauty with sudden life and growth.

"And what do you expect, then?" she asked.

Leland smiled. "I don't quite know, but it must be something good and beautiful. What is in all Nature is in us too. My dear," and he made a little gesture, "one can feel, and not quite understand. The wheat yonder doesn't know why and how it grows, but, since you gave me your promise at Barrock-holme, I have been waiting for something to come to me."

"Ah," said Carrie again, "after what has happened, you can expect it still?"

The man looked at her gravely. "Hope is indestructible, and some day the rain will come. One cannot hurry it, one can only work and wait."

Carrie smiled a little, though once more pride and a curious tenderness struggled within her.

"Well," she said, "in the meantime, Jake is no doubt wondering whether we are coming in to breakfast."

They turned, and went back to the house, with the sunshine bright upon them, and the clean scents of the soil in their nostrils. The gladness that was in all things reacted upon them both.

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Half an hour later, Leland set about his work again, and, as he had leagues to ride to visit one or two farms, and to see where there was likely to be any wild hay in the sloos, dusk was closing down before he came back again. In his absence, something had happened that left Carrie confused and startled. The men were trooping in for the six o'clock supper, when a light waggon swung into sight over the crest of the rise. As it reached the door of the homestead, one of the two men in it sprang down. Carrie was standing in the entrance hall when Jake showed him in, and she caught her breath with a little gasp when she saw who it was. The man who stood smiling at her with the sunlight on his face was the one she had parted from on the path above the ravine at Barrock-holme.

"Reggie!" she said.

Urmston laughed. "Yes," he said. "In the flesh. I have ridden most of two hundred miles on horseback and in a waggon to get here, in the expectation that you would be pleased to see me."

Carrie stood still, thankful that she was in the shadow, though for the moment she could not tell whether she was pleased or not. For one thing, the man's assurance that she would feel so somewhat jarred upon her, and the advantage was with him, for he had come there knowing that he would see her, and she had not expected him.

"Of course I am," she said. "But the waggon?"

"I hired the man to drive me. I suppose he can put up here, and go back to-morrow. Your husband will no doubt set me on my way to the railroad, when I go." [Pg 176]

Carrie Leland was not, as a rule, readily shaken out of her serenity, but she was almost disconcerted now. Urmston evidently meant to stay, and even the stranger has only to ask for shelter upon the prairie. The man before her had once considered himself much more to her than a stranger.

"Yes," she said. "He will be glad to see you. Sit down while I tell Jake about the teamster, and see that your room is made ready."

She left him somewhat abruptly, and Urmston laughed a little. "Too startled even to shake hands with me," he murmured. "I wonder if that is significant."

Twenty minutes later, he was sitting down with Carrie and Mrs. Annersly at supper, and was not altogether astonished when the elder lady, who, he fancied, had never been fond of him, turned to him with a frank question.

"What did you come here for?" she said.

"To see Carrie—and yourself, madam," and Urmston smiled with a mischievous relish that made him look very young. "Could one venture to hope that in your case the pleasure is reciprocated?"

"I am, at least, disposed to tolerate anybody from the Old Country, though I can't go very much further. When one has been a few months here, one is apt to become contented with the products of Canada."

"The wheat? Have you turned farmer?"

Eveline Annersly's eyes twinkled. "No," she said. "The men. They are, after all, the finest thing this country raises." [Pg 177]

Urmston laughed, though he felt that he had been favoured with a hint. Mrs. Annersly, however, had more to say.

"Have you suddenly grown energetic, and decided to do something?" she asked.

"No," said Urmston. "As a matter of fact, I came out to see the country and enjoy myself, although I have an ostensible mission. Geoffrey Crossthwaite is, as you are aware, a meddler in social economics, and has lately become interested in one of the especially commendable schemes for dumping into our dependencies the folks nobody seems to want at home."

"Ah," said Eveline Annersly, "that explains the thing."

Urmston flushed a trifle, and forced a smile.

"Well," he said, "I'm not quite sure that it does in itself. I happen to know a little about English farming, and am expected to report upon the prospects of giving other undesirables a start in life here, though there are two regular experts with the party."

"So you made a journey of two hundred miles to see Carrie and me, while they did the work? Still, I have no doubt her husband will be able to teach you a little about Canadian farming."

Urmston made a little gesture. "I am a stranger, madam, and in your hands. Treat me gently."

This was said good-humouredly, and with some gracefulness; but, trifling as the matter was, Carrie contrasted his attitude with the one she fancied her husband would have adopted. He would have braced himself for the encounter against much longer odds. She was grateful, however, to Eveline Annersly for the bantering conversation, as it gave her time to decide exactly what her own course must be. The circumstances were certainly somewhat embarrassing. When at last the meal was over, Eveline Annersly stuck to them persistently, and it was only when the chill of the clear, cold evening settled down upon the prairie that she left them alone upon the verandah. Urmston, who lay languidly graceful in a cane chair, glanced at Carrie. [Pg 178]

"I have been looking forward to seeing you for days, and now I feel that this is not quite what I expected. You have changed," he said.

Carrie laughed, though she felt that the wistful note in his voice was genuine. She remembered, too, that she had once been fond of and believed in him, but she had, as she expressed it, grown since then, while it was evident that he was still the same. In fact, she felt he was remarkably young.

"Well," she said, "you have not."

"No," said Urmston; "I am, unfortunately, one of the people who don't change at all. It would be so much easier for me if I did."

This was sufficiently plain, but it brought no gratification to the girl. On the whole, she was rather annoyed with him, though she had a lingering tenderness for him still. After all, he had loved her as well as he was capable of loving, and that counts for a good deal with some women.

"There was," he said, "only one woman who could have made the most out of me, and have led

me to a higher level."

"And she married another man. It is remarkably hard to reach a more elevated level alone, and a woman would naturally rather lean on than drag her companion." [Pg 179]

Urmston's face flushed. "I think I could have been capable of a good deal more than I probably ever shall be now, if you could have trusted me."

"Still," said Carrie, with a half-wistful sense of regret she could not wholly drive out, "the time when I might have done so has gone."

The man leant forward a trifle nearer her, "Carrie," he said, a trifle hoarsely, "are you happy with this Canadian?"

The girl felt her cheeks burn, and was glad that the soft dusk was now creeping into the verandah. "Well," she said, "I am as happy as I deserve to be."

Then there was a drumming of hoofs, and she was only pleased when Leland swung himself down, hot and dusty, from the saddle. He came into the verandah, and stood a moment glancing at the stranger.

"Mr. Reginald Urmston—an old friend of mine at Barrock-holme," said the girl. "I am not quite sure whether you have ever met my husband before."

Leland held out a hard hand, and Carrie was grateful for the swiftness with which he did it. It suggested an unquestioning confidence in her.

"Oh, yes," he said, "I remember. Glad to see you, Mr. Urmston. Carrie's friends are always welcome. Hope you'll stay here a month if you feel like it."

Mrs. Annersly and Gallwey entered the verandah just then, and, when the others left them shortly afterwards, remained there. Gallwey thought that his companion had something to say to him. Though there was nothing very definite to warrant it, he felt that they were allies. [Pg 180]

"One could almost fancy that you didn't seem quite pleased with—circumstances," he said.

"Well," said Eveline Annersly, "I don't think I am. If that man had fallen out of his waggon and broken his leg before he got here, I almost believe I should have been happier. I do not care in the least whether that is a judicious speech or not."

Gallwey grinned. "There are," he said significantly, "a good many badger-holes scattered about the prairie, and the horse that puts its foot in one is apt to come down awkwardly. I wonder if there is anything definite you expect from me?"

"I should suggest that you insist upon teaching Urmston farming, and keep him busy at it," said Mrs. Annersly.

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CHAPTER XVI

URMSTON SHOWS HIS PRUDENCE

It was falling dusk when Reginald Urmston strolled along the little trail through the birch bluff with one of Leland's cigars in his hand. He had been at Prospect a week now, and had on the whole found the time pass pleasantly, though he felt that Carrie's attitude towards him, while no doubt the correct one, left much to be desired from his point of view. If he had been asked exactly what he had expected from her when he came there, he would have had some difficulty in framing a concise answer, for he was a man who acted on impulse, without prevision, or any great strength of purpose. Still, he had certainly not looked for the matter-of-fact friendliness she displayed. He felt that a few hints of regret for happiness thrown away, or, at least, a sorrowful protest or two against the stern necessity which had separated them, would have been considerably more appropriate, and he would have been prepared to offer delicate sympathy.

It is also probable that he would have done it gracefully, for, although he had not exactly shone at the crisis as a passionate lover, he had the capacity for making a successful philanderer. Carrie, however, had never admitted that she was either unhappy or dissatisfied with her husband, and the farmer's indifference was somewhat galling. Leland did not seem to resent in the least the fact that the stranger spent a good deal of his time in his wife's company, and frequently strolled up and down with her in the lingering twilight, between the house and the birch bluff. It suggested that Leland had either an implicit confidence in his wife, or a very low opinion of Urmston's attractiveness, and the latter found neither of these surmises particularly consoling. He had certainly loved Carrie, and fancied that he did so still. [Pg 182]

On the evening in question, he expected to meet her, and hoped Eveline Annersly would not, as generally happened, be there as well. He did not like Eveline Annersly, or her little ironical speeches, for, while he could not have complained of her active hostility, had she shown any, it

was naturally not gratifying to be made to feel that she was merely amused with him. It was a clear, still day, and the pale green of evening gleamed behind the birches, while their slender stems stood out like ebony columns against the glare of smoky red on the verge of the prairie. The coolness was exhilarating, and there was something in the deep stillness under which the prairie rolled away, vast and shadowy, that vaguely stirred the man. He was in a somewhat complacent mood, for Carrie had been unusually gracious to him that day, and his cigar was very excellent. He was thinking of her when he was startled by a soft beat of hoofs, and, looking up, saw a mounted man come suddenly out of the shadows.

The stranger pulled his horse up sharply, and sat at rest for a moment or two gazing down on him. He wore a wide hat, a loose shirt above his jean trousers, and long boots. With one hand on the holster at his hip, he looked undoubtedly truculent.

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"Leland's in the house?" he asked.

"I believe so," said Urmston, who felt a bit uneasy.

The stranger moved his hand a trifle, so that the butt of a pistol appeared above the edge of the holster.

"Then walk straight in front of you, through the bluff, and out on to the prairie," he said. "If you turn round, or come back in the next ten minutes, you're going to have trouble with my partner, who is watching you."

Urmston did not move at once. He did not think this visit promised anything particularly pleasant to Leland, but that was, after all, not his affair. Still, though he was not expecting either of them just then, there was a chance that Carrie or Mrs. Annersly might enter the bluff. He had no reason to suppose that the stranger would cause them any annoyance if they did, but the man's appearance was far from prepossessing.

"Well," said the latter sharply, "what in the name of thunder are you stopping for? Hump yourself before you're sorry."

Urmston saw the pistol slide almost out of the holster, and the man's hand move on the bridle. The gestures were suggestive, and he did as he was bidden. Carrie, he decided, had not come out yet, or he would have seen her. He did not stop until rather more than the prescribed ten minutes had expired, and then found himself well out in the silent prairie. It was almost dark now, but he thought he saw a dim object moving down the edge of the wheat, and that he could hear the muffled beat of hoofs. There was only one horse, however, and he realised that the part he had played had, perhaps, not been an altogether brilliant one. On the whole, he fancied, it would be advisable to say nothing about it. He went back through the bluff, and came upon Carrie moving across the space of dusty grass between it and the house.

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"Do you know who it was that rode through the bluff a little while ago?" she asked.

"No," said Urmston, as carelessly as he could, "I certainly do not."

Carrie, so far as he could make out, appeared a trifle astonished. "Well," she said, "I thought you must have met the man. I saw him come out and ride towards the house, but didn't seem to recognise him. Still, I daresay he was one of our visitors' cattle boys."

"I scarcely think it's worth worrying about," said Urmston, reflectively. "For one thing, it's too beautiful a night to waste in thinking about a Canadian stock-rider. One would hardly imagine any of them are sufficiently interesting to warrant it."

Carrie understood that this was probably as far as he considered it advisable to venture, since she knew that he considered her husband a stock-rider too. Although she was not exactly pleased, it did not seem worth while to show her displeasure.

"One must talk of something," she said.

Urmston appeared to glance at her reproachfully. "There was a time when you and I could be content without a word. Silence is now and then wonderfully expressive. Thoughts are often spoiled by being forced into clumsy speech."

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"That time has gone by some little while ago," she said; and there was a quiet decisiveness in the girl's tone that the man did not seem to notice. "Perhaps it was our own fault, though I do not know. Circumstances were against us, but it might have been different, had we had the courage to take our destiny in our hands. Still, I am not admitting that I am sorry we did not do so."

Urmston was sensible of a slightly uncomfortable feeling. It had been borne in upon him that, had he shown himself bolder and more persistent, Carrie might, after all, never have married Leland. Still, he did not think it kind that she should remind him of it, if that, indeed, was what she had meant to do.

"Those days," he said gently, "will always live with me. I have only the memory of them to cheer me, and I cherish it as my dearest possession."

The girl did not know whether she was touched or not. She was naturally, at least, a little sorry for him, but his self-compassionate sentimentality was apt to become tiresome at times.

"Wouldn't it be wiser if you made an effort to keep it a little further in the background?" she said.

"It would, in the circumstances, at least, be more appropriate."

The man dropped his voice. "Carrie," he said, "I couldn't if I wished to. Love of one kind is indestructible. Even the fact that you were forced into marrying another man cannot destroy it. He is, after all, an accident."

Carrie's face had flushed, but she laughed outright Urmston's love, indestructible as he said it was, had, as she realised now, prompted him to do very little, while there was something singularly inapposite in his terming her strenuous, forceful husband an accident. She felt that, had he been in her disconsolate lover's place, he would at any cost have broken through the encompassing difficulties.

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"Ah," she said, "that was really a little ridiculous. Charley Leland is rather unalterable, inflexible of purpose."

Urmston appeared confused, and it was, perhaps, a relief to both when Eveline Annersly came up.

"Haven't those people got through their business yet?" asked Carrie.

"No," said the elder lady. "They were still talking as earnestly as ever when I passed the door. I think something of importance must be going on."

The surmise was, as a matter of fact, warranted, for that evening Leland and his neighbours once more sat about the little table discussing the outlaws. A little apart from them, Sergeant Grier sat intent and upright. The windows of the big room were wide open, and the cool evening air flowed in.

"My part is quite simple," the Sergeant said. "I shall be glad to act upon any reliable information you may be able to put before me, and, if it appears necessary, call upon you for assistance in heading off or laying hands on the whisky men. In that case, you will be, for the time being, practically police troopers. I guess it's not my business to ask if you are acting as an organisation or not. There's nothing to stop any citizen giving me information; in fact, it's his duty."

"The question," said one of the others, "is how far you consider it necessary for us to go into the thing systematically, and not just report any facts that happen to come under our notice."

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"That," said the Sergeant, a trifle drily, "is for you to settle among yourselves, but I can give you something to figure on. I reported to headquarters that the toughs among the railroad settlements were standing in with the outlaws, and that there was probably going to be trouble soon. The answer was that they had no complaints from the settlement or from any of the farmers, and that they could hardly spare a man. If things promised to become serious, I was to report again, and, in the meanwhile, they would try to send me two more troopers; you know as well as I do how much I can do with them."

Leland laughed. "Oh, yes," he said. "Boys, it's quite evident that, if we want anything done, we shall have to do it ourselves."

"You have hit it," said one of the others. "The one point is whether or not merely to want it wouldn't be just as wise. I've had two steers driven off since I took a hand in the fight, Nevis has had the hay burned off his sloos, and we know what has happened at Prospect. Nothing has gone wrong in the case of the men who left things to the police. I guess that's significant. If the Sergeant calls me out, I'll come; but I've no desire to go round hunting trouble."

"That," said a comrade, "sounds far more sensible than it is. The Sergeant's troopers can't do anything. There aren't enough of them. And there's the frontier near enough for the boys to skip out across. Well, it may be some time before the police bosses get a move on—it usually is—and in the meanwhile we'll have every tough in the country standing in with the whisky men. While we lie quiet, they're going to get bolder."

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Just then Leland turned sharply in his chair, and the others, who noticed it, leant towards the window. It was wide open and there was no light in the room. Outside, the green transparency was just fading into the soft blueness of early dusk. Nobody else had heard anything, but Leland's figure was outlined against the last of the light, and there was an ominous tenseness and expectancy in his attitude. They waited a moment, though none of them knew exactly why, until a little square object, which had evidently entered by the window, struck the table.

In another moment Leland had swung himself out by the narrow window, which was some distance from the floor. Then there was a crash outside, and the rest made for the outer door on the opposite side of the building. There was no sign of anybody when they reached it, but two of them heard a beat of receding hoofs. The rider did not seem to be in any great haste, and they fancied he was rather bent upon slipping away quietly. Then Leland appeared again, limping, and beckoned them back to the room, where he lighted the lamp before he sat down. His face was drawn.

"I wasn't exactly careful how I went out, and came down hard on my elbow and my knee," he said. "It took all the running out of me, and the fellow evidently had his horse ready. Before we could get a horse saddled, he'd be 'most two miles away. Well, we'll see what he has sent me, though I have a notion what it is."

He opened the little packet, and took out a pistol bullet. "That may have been meant to weight it,

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or quite as likely as a hint. Now, I'll tell you what he says."

One of them moved the lamp for him, and there was close attention as he read the note that had been wrapped about the bullet: "Let up before you get hurt. You have had two warnings, but it's going to be different with the third one. There's a man or two on your trail who mean business."

He flung the note on the table with a little contemptuous laugh. "I think it's genuine, and he means well, but I'm going on."

"That's not very clear to me," said one of his companions.

"It's quite easy. The rustlers are there for the money and aren't anxious for trouble, though, if it's necessary, they are quite willing to make it. That, I figure, is the view of most of them. But they had a man killed not long ago, and it's probably different with one or two of his friends. Unless the others freeze them off, they may undertake to run me down for the fun of the thing."

There was a murmur of sympathy and agreement, and Leland saw that the rest were watching him curiously.

"Oh," he said impatiently, "I'm going on."

Then they set about discussing the rumour that another lot of whisky was being run. By the time this was over, they were all, including the man with the misgivings, of one mind again. Still, the Sergeant knew that, if Leland had hesitated, it was quite probable he would have looked in vain for any support worth having from most of them. The last man had driven away when Carrie found him sitting thoughtfully in the empty room.

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"Something has disturbed you?" she said.

Leland looked up, and there was a trace of dryness in his smile. "I have had quite a few things to worry me lately," he said, handing her the note. "This is merely one of them."

The girl read it, and looked at him with a perplexed frown on her face. Its contents troubled her, for she had acquired from Gallwey and others a good deal of information concerning the outlaws. She also knew that Leland would, in all probability, not have given it to her, had he reason to suppose that it could cause her any great anxiety, and the knowledge hurt her.

"Well," she said quietly, "what do you propose to do?"

Leland smiled a little. "My dear, what would you expect me to do?"

There was a faint flash in Carrie's eyes, and she lifted her head a trifle. "Oh," she said, "there is of course only one thing possible—to you."

"Thank you! I'm afraid there may be just a little risk in this for my wife as well. I didn't quite remember it at the time."

Carrie laughed. "Do you think that would count?" Then she laid her hand upon his shoulder. "Still, Charley, you will—to please me—be very careful?"

Leland fancied he felt her hand tremble, and thought he saw a sudden softness in her eyes, but he could not be quite sure. Before he could decide how to profit by it, she had turned her face aside and gone.

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CHAPTER XVII

CARRIE MAKES A COMPARISON

A week had passed since the last meeting of the farmers at Prospect, when Carrie and Eveline Annersly sat out on the verandah of the house somewhat late at night. A full moon hung over the prairie, and the silence was impressive. Urmston, who was, as usual, also there, leant against the balustrade with his back to the light, missing every uplifting appeal in the boundless sweep of softly gleaming grass of the prairie. He was not one of the men upon whom the silent strength of Nature has any marked reaction. His thoughts concerned himself and the pleasures of the moment, and he was seldom still or silent very long, though his activities, like his speeches, were usually petty, for the capacity for absorption in a sustaining purpose was not in him. Carrie Leland had come to realise it of late, though she did not exactly know why. It may have been the result of a subconscious comparison of him with another man. In any case, the recognition of the fact had brought her a sense of annoyance, for there was strength as well as pride in her, and she was fond of Urmston, who was a man of her own world.

Urmston, in the meanwhile, found the contemplation of her sufficient for him, and it is probable that most other men would have done the same. She lay, clad in a long white dress, in a big lounge-chair, with the silvery moonlight full upon her. It brought out the duskiness of her eyes and hair, and made her somewhat cold beauty the more apparent, though there was at the time a faint, illusory gentleness in her face, a note the man had noticed more than once of late. He

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would have liked to think that he had brought it there, but could not quite persuade himself that this was so, though there had been a time when he had seen that soft light creep into her eyes as she greeted him. He had also a vague, uncomfortable feeling that, although circumstances had certainly been against him, it was, perhaps, his own fault that he could now no longer call it up. Carrie was gracious to him, save when he was too venturesome, but he saw that her regard for him was widely different from what it had been. There was more reserve in her attitude towards him than her mere recognition of what was due to her husband could account for. He also noticed that she was a trifle anxious, which brought him no great consolation, in view of the fact that Leland had ridden out with his rifle early the day before. Eveline Annersly finally spoke after the silence that had lasted for several minutes.

"Gallwey seems to fancy Charley should have been back several hours ago," she said. "Charley told him he would be in to supper, if all went—as they expected it to."

She stole a swift glance at Carrie, who was then gazing out across the prairie as though in search of something, and, though the girl did not move, she fancied there was a change in her expression. It suggested a growing uneasiness.

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"I scarcely suppose Charley could tell exactly how long they would be," she said.

"That," said Eveline Annersly, "is very probable, and, in any case, he is not likely to come to harm. In fact, one would be more inclined to feel anxious about the outlaws he might fall in with than about Charley Leland. I daresay it was fanciful, but, when he rode away, he reminded me of the picture the Acres have of the moss-trooper. You, of course, know the one I mean—the man in the steel cap with the moonlight sparkling on his spear. There is something of the same grimness in both faces, and, in the moss-trooper's case, the artist hit it rather well. It is an intangible something one can't well define, primitive probably, for I don't remember having seen it in the face of any man I am acquainted with at home."

She turned towards Urmston with a little laugh. "You haven't got it, Reggie, though now and then I almost fancy that Carrie has. I don't think you would have made a good moss-trooper."

Urmston smiled in turn. "I really don't think the kind of life they led would have appealed to me."

"No," said Eveline Annersly, "you would have sat with the harp in the bower, and made love rather nicely and judiciously—that is, when circumstances were propitious."

Urmston flushed, glad he was in the shadow where Carrie could not see him. He felt, as he had felt before, that he would rather like to gag Eveline Annersly.

"Can one fall in love judiciously?" he asked.

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"As a matter of fact, I'm not sure that one can. In the days we are referring to, they very seldom did. The border knights apparently put on steel cap and corselet when they went wooing. When Lochinvar rode to Netherby, he swam the Esk, and it is very probable that the men who made love in his fashion later on had their swords loose when they crossed it, whipping hard for Gretna by the lower bridge. Of course, as everybody knows, all that has gone out of fashion long ago—only I think the primitive something remains which would drive a man full tilt against circumstances for sweet love's sake. At least, one sees it now and then in the eyes of the men out here."

Urmston longed to stop her, but he had discovered on other occasions that an attempt to do so was very apt to bring about unwished-for results. He accordingly said nothing, and Carrie, who, perhaps, felt as he did, changed the subject.

"It was rather curious that the man who threw the note through the window when our neighbours were last here was able to creep up without being seen," she said.

"I can't help thinking that somebody must have seen him," said Eveline Annersly.

"Then why didn't they mention it?"

"I naturally don't know. Still, one would fancy that the outlaw found means of impressing whomever he came across with the fact that he didn't want to be announced, and that it would be wiser to fall in with his wishes. Afterwards, the man he met would no doubt feel that, as his silence wasn't altogether creditable, it would be advisable to say nothing about it."

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Carrie looked up sharply. "Of course, that sounds possible. Only from what I know of them, he would hardly have succeeded in overawing any of the boys at Prospect."

"You can't imagine your husband or Gallwey standing against a tree with his eyes shut for ten minutes because a ferocious stranger requested him to?"

"No," and Carrie's laugh had a little ring in it, "I certainly couldn't. In fact, I think it would be very apt to bring trouble on the stranger."

She stopped a moment, and looked again, expectantly, across the prairie.

"I can't understand how the rustler got here without being noticed at all," she said reflectively. "Jake was in the paddock when I went out, and he feels quite sure that nobody could have slipped by without his seeing them. Of course, it is possible the man came through the bluff."

"I fancy not. In that case Reggie would have met him. I was standing by the window when he sauntered into the wood, and it would be about ten minutes, or, perhaps, a little more, before you left the house."

She flung a glance in the direction of Urmston, who felt horribly uncomfortable. It occurred to him that, if she had seen him enter the bluff, it was also possible that she had seen the outlaw come out. That she did not say she had done so was, after all, no great consolation, for he knew Eveline Annersly could be silent when she had a reason. He was afraid that, if she had one now, the result might not be altogether creditable to him when she saw fit to speak. In the meanwhile, it was evident that she expected him to say something. [Pg 196]

"I believe you were right about the time," he said.

Carrie looked up, for his indifference seemed too pronounced to be quite natural, but she brushed the half-formed thought out of her mind. Urmston was a man of her own station, and could not, she reasoned, be deficient in qualities which even her husband's teamsters possessed. Still, while she sat silent, looking out upon the vast sweep of plain, she could not help once more contrasting him with the man she had been driven into marrying. She understood Leland better, now that she had seen the land he lived in, for there were respects in which he resembled it. Men, indeed, usually do not only fit themselves to their environment, but borrow from it something that becomes a part of them.

It was evidently from the prairie that Charley Leland had drawn his strength of character, his capacity for holding on with everything against him, and his silent, deep-rooted optimism. She had seen that plain bleached with months of frost and parched with drought, but the flowers had sprung up from the streaming sod, and now the wheat was growing tall and green again. One could feel out there that, while all life is a struggle which every blade of wheat must wage, in due time fruition would come. Her husband, it seemed, realised it, and had also faith in himself. She remembered how, when his neighbours hesitated, fearing the outlaws' vengeance, he had said he was going on even if he went on alone. She also knew that he would be as good as his word, for he was not the man to turn back because there was peril in his path. She could rather fancy him hastening to meet it, with the little hard smile she had often seen in his steady eyes. [Pg 197]

Then from out of the great stillness there crept the distant sound of a moving horse, and Carrie felt a feeling of relief come over her. She would scarcely admit it to herself, but, during the past two or three hours, she had been troubled by a growing sense of uneasiness. She would not have felt it a few months earlier, for, while she would have had no harm come to him, there was no hiding the fact that it would have set her free from an almost intolerable bondage. It was, however, different now.

The thud of hoofs grew louder, and the dim figure of a mounted man grew out of the prairie. A little thrill ran through her as she watched him swing past at a canter and draw rein between the house and the stables. He waited a moment as though looking for somebody in whose care to leave the horse, and Carrie could see that he was weary and dusty. Though his face was dimly visible, she fancied it was drawn and grey. Slanting over his shoulder, the barrel of his Marlin rifle glinted in the moon.

"That," said Eveline Annersly, "is, I think, more suggestive than ever of the border spear."

She glanced at Carrie as the girl rose and went down the stairway. Then Eveline Annersly turned to Urmston with a little smile.

"I scarcely think they will want us, and I'm going in," she said.

Urmston had moved into the moonlight now, and his face was set. "There is, of course, no reason why you shouldn't, but I'm not sure that you are entirely right," he said. "In fact, if it's permissible to mention it, I had a notion that Carrie asked you here to make the convenient third." [Pg 198]

His companion looked at him with a faint gleam in her eyes. "You haven't any great penetration, after all, or you would have seen that I have outstayed my usefulness. In any case, I feel inclined to favour you with a piece of advice. It may save you trouble if you go back to your agricultural duties as soon as possible."

"You seem unusually anxious to get rid of me," said the man, with something in his tone that suggested satisfaction.

Eveline Annersly laughed as she rose and moved back into the shadow. "Oh, dear no! If I were really anxious, the thing would be remarkably easy."

She left him with this, and Urmston, who leant somewhat moodily on the balustrade, felt that his love for her was certainly no greater than it had been before. He began to feel himself especially unfortunate in having fallen in with the rustler.

In the meanwhile, Leland, who started as he saw the girl coming towards him, swung himself out of the saddle and stood awaiting her, with the bridle of the jaded horse in his hand. His face was worn and weary, and he stood slackly with all the springy suppleness apparently gone out of him. The grime was thick upon his coarse blue shirt and jean jacket.

"It was very good of you to wait so long," he said.

Carrie smiled in a curious fashion. "Did you expect me to sleep?"

"You were a little anxious about me, then?"

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"Of course!" said the girl, softly. "Wouldn't it have been unnatural if I hadn't been?"

Leland made an abrupt gesture. "My dear, I don't want you to do the natural or the correct thing, that is, just because it is so."

"Ah," said Carrie, "who can tell exactly why they do anything? Still, I was anxious. How have you got on?"

The man laughed a trifle grimly. "Badly—we were either fooled or outgeneraled, and the whisky boys came out ahead of us. We had one horse shot, and another broke its leg in a badger-hole. Hadn't you better get in now? It'll take me some time to put up."

"I slept most of last night, and you have been out on the prairie two nights and days. I'm coming with you to the stable. I can, at least, hold a lantern."

They turned away together, Leland walking very stiffly, the girl, who felt her heart beating, close at his side, until they reached one of the uninjured buildings. It was very dark inside, and redolent with the smell of wild peppermint in the prairie hay. Leland groped for a lantern, and, when he had lighted it, hung it to a hook in the stall joist, so that its light fell upon them.

"I really think you would have been sorry if the boys had brought me back with a bullet in me?" he said, half-questioningly.

He saw the little shiver that ran through his companion, but, in another moment, she was standing very straight and still. "How can you ask me that?" she said. "I did not think you would be vindictive—to me."

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"Look at me," and Leland, leaning forward, laid a hard, dust-grimed hand on her shoulder. "It wouldn't have been a release when you had got over the shock of it?"

The colour crept into Carrie's face, and, after the first moment, she did not meet his eyes, while the man, with an impetuous movement, slipped a hand about her waist. Then, with a forced calm, he slowly drew her towards him and kissed her on the brow and cheek and mouth. For an instant only he held her fast. Then he let his hands fall.

Carrie looked at him, with the hot blood tingling in her cheeks.

"Now," he said gravely, though there was a faint ring of exultation in his voice, "that is for a sign that you belong to me, and I guess I'm strong enough to keep what is mine. You couldn't get away from me if you wanted to."

Carrie realised it, though the fact no longer brought her any sense of intolerable restraint or disgust. She said nothing, and made no sign. Leland went on.

"Still, I'm not going to hurry you, or spoil things by impatience," he said. "You will be willing to take me for what I am some day, and, if things hurt you as they are now, that's the one way of escape. There can't be any other until one of us is dead."

He turned from her, and commenced to unbuckle the horse's girth, while Carrie, scarcely knowing why, slipped past him, busying herself with the head-stall. Then she brought the chopped fodder while he went for water, and stood holding the lantern while he rubbed the jaded beast down. Neither of them said anything, but it was evident to both that the distance between them had been lessened. By and by they went back together towards the house, and Leland laughingly held up the lantern when they reached the threshold.

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"You see, I never even remembered to put this thing down," he said.

Carrie smiled, but there was a trace of diffidence in her manner.

"I have kept your supper, and will bring it in as soon as you come down," she said. "Everything you will want clean is laid out in your room."

"Oh, yes," said Leland, reaching out and grasping her arm, "Mrs. Nesbit is quite a smart housekeeper."

Carrie shook his grasp off, and flitted away from him. "Mrs. Nesbit is not responsible this time," she said laughingly. "I'm afraid I haven't looked after my household duties as I should have done hitherto."

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CHAPTER XVIII

A MIDNIGHT VISITOR

Summer had come in earnest, and Leland, who had ridden out at daybreak with every man at Prospect to cut prairie hay, had not come back, when Carrie sat late at night beside the stove in the big room. The stove was lighted, and a kettle stood on it. A meal was laid out upon the table, for Carrie expected that Leland would arrive during the next hour. In fact, a horse stood ready saddled in one of the stables, and she was trying to decide whether she should ride out to meet him or stay where she was. It was a still night, the house was unpleasantly hot, and the thought of a canter through the cool darkness was attractive. Leland, who was busier than ever, had, however, been away somewhat frequently of late, and pride was still strong in her. She would not unbend too far, or give him reason to believe that he could be sure of her, while there was also the difficulty that Urmston, who was then sitting close by, would probably insist upon accompanying her, and she fancied that such an arrangement might not commend itself to her husband. Urmston, too, had been growing somewhat presumptuous, and she felt that on the whole it might not be advisable to have him for a companion. Something, however, urged her to set out, though she would not admit that it was the thought of Leland's satisfaction at meeting her. She had scarcely seen him, except for an odd five minutes, during the last week or two, and that piqued her, although she knew that he had many anxieties and much to do. There was, it seemed, nothing to be gained by being unduly gracious, so long as he was content without her company.

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This was, perhaps, a little hard upon Leland, who was then toiling at something, or in the saddle, from early morning to late at night. He had a good many teams to be fed, and hay was scarce after the unusually dry spring. Hay is seldom sown in that country, and, as the natural grass is, for the most part, only a few inches high, the prairie farmer must cut it where it grows harsh and tall in the sloos, or hollows, that are turned for a few weeks into lakes and ponds by the melting snows. Most of them had dried up prematurely that season, and, as the supply of the natural produce was becoming a serious question, Leland had to make long journeys in search of it. On the night in question, the men were camped beside a distant sloo, though he himself purposed to ride home, calling on one of his neighbours on the way. While Carrie considered whether she would set out to meet him or not, Urmston glanced at the tray upon the table with a sly little laugh.

"You are getting domesticated, Carrie," he said. "I used to fancy that you looked down upon anything connected with housekeeping. Be warned, and don't go too far. You saw what domesticity has done for Mrs. Custer."

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"She seems happy," said the girl, reflectively. "Custer, I believe, is, in his own way, very kind to her."

There was a trace of wistfulness in her voice that jarred upon the listener, and the colour rose in his face.

"Carrie," he said with sudden passion, "the possibility of you ever becoming like her is horrible—wholly horrible. There is much that Custer is responsible for. One can see what that woman was before she married him, and what has happened to her since is a warning. The struggle has worn all the daintiness and refinement out of her. With that brood of children to be provided for, what has she to look forward to but a life of hard work that will steadily drag her to the level of an English dairy drudge?"

Carrie shivered a little, for there was, she knew, some truth in this. "There is," she said, "a considerable difference between Charley Leland and Tom Custer."

"Of course," and Urmston, who appeared to put a restraint upon himself, smiled drily. "In his own half-animal fashion, Custer is, as you mention, evidently fond of her. If he hadn't been, she might have escaped part, at least, of what she had to put up with. I'm not sure one couldn't term it degradation. The difference between the man you married and Custer is the one thing I am sincerely thankful for."

"Reggie," said Carrie sharply, "I should like to know just what you mean."

Urmston laughed. "I suppose I'm presuming, but I don't seem to mind. Your husband is, at least, content to leave you very much alone. He apparently comes home to eat, and, when he is no longer hungry, disappears again. It does not seem to matter that he generally gets his meals alone. I fancy it is a week since I have seen him."

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He stopped, and leant forward a little in his chair. "I didn't say it to hurt you, Carrie, but because the fact that it is so, is and must necessarily be an unutterable relief to me. The indifference of such a man is incomparably better than what he would probably consider his affection. You can see what it has brought Mrs. Custer."

Carrie Leland flushed angrily. It is not especially pleasant to any woman to be told that, although she may not be fond of him, her husband or lover is indifferent to her; but it was not that alone which brought the blood tingling to her face. She was capable of passion, but domesticity in itself had no great attraction for her. In fact, she rather shrank from it, and Urmston's words had been unpleasantly prophetic, since she knew that the placid affection of a man who only expected that she should rear a brood of children and keep his house in order would become intolerable to her. Still, she felt that this, at least, would never be her husband's view concerning her, and that there was a much greater difference than Urmston realised between him and Thomas Custer. Leland, in fact, had by a clean life of effort and grim self-denial, in which the often worn-out body was held in stern subjection to the will, attained a vague, indefinite something which was not far

removed from spirituality.

"Reggie," she said, "what have I done that would lead you to believe you were warranted in speaking to me in this fashion?"

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The man made a little passionate gesture. "Oh," he said, "nothing. You are in everything beyond reproach; that is what makes it so hard to bear. Why should you be wasted upon a man without appreciation?"

"That is enough." As Carrie checked him with a lifted hand, a sparkle came into her eyes. "Do you suppose for a moment that I would listen to anything further?"

Urmston sat silent, his face flushed, and his fingers fumbling with his watch-chain. For five minutes neither of them spoke. It was very still in the big room, save for the crackling of the stove. Then Carrie started, with a little gasp, for the door swung softly open, apparently of itself, and she grasped Urmston's arm.

"Shut it! Be quick!" she said.

Urmston swung round, and she felt the involuntary move he made when his eyes rested on the door. There were in the house, as both remembered, only Eveline Annersly, who had retired early with a headache, and Mrs. Nesbit, who would have come in by the other entrance. Doors do not open of their own accord when there is not a breath of wind astir, and it is somewhat disconcerting when they appear to do so in the middle of the night. Urmston accordingly sat where he was, watching the opening grow wider, his nerves atingle with something akin to fear. Carrie gripped him hard.

"Get Charley's rifle!" she whispered.

At last, with no great alacrity, he rose to his feet, but the time when he might have done anything had passed, for a masked man stood just inside the threshold with a big pistol in his hand.

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"I guess you'll stop just where you are," he said.

Urmston stood still, as most men would have done, though Leland's rifle hung close above his head. The stranger moved forward a pace or two. He wore soft moccasins, and a strip of grain-bag, pierced at the eyes and bound about his face, added nothing to his attractiveness.

"Don't move, Mrs. Leland," he said. "Where is your husband?"

Carrie straightened herself with an effort. She did not like the man's tone nor his inquiry. Urmston was close beside her, but she felt that she had not much to expect from him, though she was too distracted to feel any contempt for him on that account.

"I don't know," she said. "Why? Do you want him?"

The man appeared to smile. "Well," he said, "I guess there's a reason for it; but, if he's willing to be reasonable, nobody's going to hurt him. In fact, we just want to make a little bargain."

Carrie glanced at the watch on her bracelet, which was another of the things which her husband had given her, and realised he might be home at any time during the next half-hour. Then she glanced covertly towards the other door which led to the kitchen; but it was some distance away, and the stranger had a pistol. An almost paralysing fear came upon her, for she knew her husband was not the man to be driven into doing anything he did not like. The stranger watched her with eyes that glittered wickedly behind the mask.

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"You know where he went?" he said.

"I do," said Carrie, a trifle too swiftly, as she remembered that he would not be there now. "He rode out to the slios on the Traverse trail to cut prairie hay."

"Exactly!" and the man laughed. "Only he went away again, or we wouldn't have come on here. Now, there are four or five of us, and we want a word with your husband, and mean to have it. It's not going to take us two minutes to find out if he's in the house."

"Then why don't you do it?"

The man looked at her with obvious admiration. Though there was fear in her heart, there was none in her face. She had the pride of her station, and every inborn prejudice in her protested against submission to any dictation from this intruding ruffian. There was a gleam in her dark eyes, and the red spot showed in her otherwise colourless cheeks again.

"Well," said the outlaw, "I guess we mean to, but I'm not going to leave you while you and your partner sneak away."

He raised his voice. "He's not here, Tom, but you may as well go round and make sure of it."

There was a tramp of booted feet in the hall outside, and then footsteps on the stairs, first mounting and then again descending. "No," a voice said, "he hasn't come home."

"Light out, and tell the others. I'll fix things with the lady," said his comrade in the room. Then he turned to Urmston. "You're a little too near that rifle. Get across there."

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Urmston crossed the room as he was bidden, for which one could scarcely blame him, and the

man sat down where he could watch them both.

"Now," he said, "I'm talking, Mrs. Leland. You listen to me. We are going to see your husband, and it might be better if we saw him here. If you can persuade him to be reasonable, you will please the boys and me. Well, it's only natural that you should know where he is, and you can't do anything. Old Jake's fast asleep in his shed, and there's not a boy about the homestead."

"Still," said Carrie quietly, "I haven't the least intention of telling you anything."

The man showed his impatience in a gesture.

"Then I guess all we have to do is to wait for him, but I can't quite figure why you should be willing to make trouble for yourself. Everybody knows you don't care two cents for Charley Leland."

Carrie winced, and felt she could have struck Urmston when she saw the little sardonic smile in his eyes. Her face grew almost colourless with anger, and she closed one hand at her side. Something which had been latent within her was now wholly roused and dominant. She knew that what the man had said was wholly untrue, and that her husband's safety depended then on her. She did not suppose for a moment that he would yield because of anything these men could do, and it was clear that they were desperate men with a bitter grievance against him. They might even kill him, and she resolutely grappled with a numbing fear. She dared not let it master her, for something must be done, and once more she felt that she had only herself to depend upon.

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"Charley Leland will make you sorry for that some day," she said.

The man grinned. "It is quite likely he is going to be sorry for himself before we are through with him. Anyway, I don't know any reason why I shouldn't eat his supper. I've ridden most of forty miles to-day trailing him."

He drew the tray upon the table nearer to him, and ate voraciously, while Carrie grew faint with apprehension as she watched him. Urmston, who had taken out a cigar, sat motionless, save that he fumbled with it instead of his watch-chain. The room was once more very still, except for the snapping of the stove and the unpleasant sounds the outlaw made over his meal. Time was flying, and Leland might arrive at any moment now. She feared that the other men were hidden beside the trail through the birch bluff, waiting to waylay him.

Then the outlaw turned to her. "I guess it would be nice to be waited on by a lady, and it might please Charley Leland when he hears of it. I'd like some coffee, and I see the pot here. Bring me the kettle."

Carrie looked at Urmston. At any risk he would surely resent this insult to her. But, though there was a shade more colour than usual in his cheeks, Urmston sat still. Then, in a flash, the inspiration came. With a glance towards the rear door, which led to the kitchen, she rose with the kettle in her hand. The lamp stood upon the table about a yard from the man, but, as he was sitting, a little nearer to her.

"Will you hold out the pot?" she said. "It's scalding hot. Take care of your hand."

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The man turned his eyes a moment, and that was enough, for before he looked up again Carrie swung the kettle round, and there was a crash as it struck the lamp. Then there was sudden darkness, out of which rang venomous expletives and howls of pain. Carrie sped towards the second door. She heard the man falling among the chairs behind her, and wasted another moment or two turning the key, which was outside. This cost her an effort, for the lock was rusty from disuse. Then she flitted along the dark corridor, and, opening the kitchen door softly, looked out upon the prairie. There was no moon, and the night was still and dark. She could hear no sound on that side of the homestead.

Slipping out, she crept in quiet haste along the wall, and with wildly beating heart crossed the open space between it and the stable. Nobody, however, attempted to stop her, and in another moment or two she was standing beside the horse which Jake had ready saddled. The animal was fresh and mettlesome, and she lost several precious minutes before she contrived to get into the saddle by scrambling on a mound of sod piled against the outside of the building. Then she struck him viciously with the quirt. One cut was all that was needed, and they were flying out into the darkness at a furious gallop.

She knew that her flight was heard, for shouts rose behind her; but she knew too that her horse was fresh and the outlaws' tired after a hard day's ride. It was also very probable that his comrades had tethered their horses somewhere while they watched the trail, since it is usually difficult to keep a prairie broncho quiet very long. All this flashed upon her while the lights of Prospect blinked and vanished as the barns and stables shut them in. With a sigh of relief, she brought the quirt down again.

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There were stars in the heavens, but the night was dark, and she could just discern an outlying birch bluff, a shadowy blur against the sky, a mile in front of her. The prairie was rutted deep along the trail by waggon-wheels, and riddled here and there with deadly badger-holes, but these were hazards that must be taken as they came. One thing was sure—the man she had married was in imminent peril, and she alone could deliver him. The fact that Urmston was left behind in the outlaws' hands did not seem to trouble her. Indeed, she scarcely remembered him at all.

She swept on, her light skirt blown about her, her loosened hair whipping her hot face, while a thud of hoofs broke out behind her. The horse's blood was up, too, so she let him go, stretched out at a flying gallop, up low rise and over long level. The birches flashed by, and the open waste lay in front. While nobody riding that pace could find the trail, there was a shallow coulee a league away with stunted birches on the edge of it, which would presently rise for a landmark out of the prairie. Once she glanced over her shoulder. There was only the soft darkness, out of which there came a thumping that seemed to be growing fainter.

She was almost upon the birches when she heard another beat of hoofs in front of her now, and she sent up a breathless cry.

"Charley!" she called, and again in fierce impatience, "Charley!"

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For a moment she was conscious of a torturing suspense, and then a man's voice came out of the darkness in answer.

"All right," it said. "I'm coming straight along."

In another few moments a shadowy figure had materialised out of the prairie. She pulled her horse up with a struggle when Leland drew bridle beside her.

"Steady, my dear," he said. "Get your breath and tell me what it is."

Carrie gasped out her news, and the man sat silent a moment or two.

"Urmston's there, and Mrs. Annersly," he said. "I don't think they'll hurt them, but I'd better get on."

Carrie leant out from the saddle, and attempted to touch his bridle as the fidgeting horses pranced side by side.

"No," she said, "you mustn't. I will not have you go. I think they mean to kill you."

Leland appeared to smile. "I guess that contract would be a little too big for them. Still, if Urmston riled them, they might hurt him. The man's a friend of yours."

Carrie laughed somewhat bitterly. "I don't think he will do anything very injudicious. Eveline Annersly's room is just across the house, and she sleeps very soundly."

"They wouldn't hurt her," said Leland, reflectively. "One could count on that. Urmston would be all right, too, if he has sense enough to keep quiet. Now, there are two of Grier's troopers camping in a bluff a league back to watch the trail, and if I could only bring them up before the rustlers go, we ought to get one or two of them. It's 'most worth while trying. You'll ride round with me?"

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Nothing more was said when Carrie signified that she was willing, and they rode on again to where the troopers were. Then with these reinforcements they turned back to Prospect, arriving there when dawn was climbing into the sky. There was no sign of the rustlers, but Urmston stood just outside the door.

"They went soon after Mrs. Leland got away," he said. "I feel that I ought to make excuses for leaving the thing to her, though I'm not sure that there was, in view of the circumstances, any other course open to me."

Leland laughed as he swung himself from the saddle. "That's all right. You did the sensible thing, and nobody's going to blame you," he said. "If you don't mind rousing Jake, we'll get the troopers breakfast before they go away. You know your way to the stables, boys."

Urmston and the troopers disappeared, and Carrie looked down on her husband, who stood, a shadowy figure, beside her stirrup.

"You," she said, with a little soft laugh, "would have found another course."

Leland said nothing, but stretched his arms up, and, when she slipped from the saddle into them, held her there while he kissed her.

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CHAPTER XIX

PRAIRIE HAY

It was the middle of a scorching afternoon when Carrie drew her waggon over a low rise and down the long slope to the dried-up sloo. Urmston, riding beside it, sprinkled white with dust, looked uncomfortably hot, and Eveline Annersly, whose face was unpleasantly flushed, tried in vain to shelter herself beneath her parasol in the jolting waggon.

"I am positively melting, and my head aches," she said. "If I had known how hot it was, you would never have got me here, and, if Mrs. Custer will keep me, I am not going back to Prospect to-

night. How does your husband work this weather?"

Carrie laughed as she pulled her team up near the sloo. She, at least, looked delightfully fresh and almost cool in her long white dress and big white hat.

"He would probably tell you it is because he has to," she said. "In any event, he seems to be working rather harder than ever."

"It is one of Charley Leland's strong points that he knows when a thing has to be done," and Eveline Annersly glanced at Urmston with a little smile. "There are men who don't, and never will, though they are sometimes able to shift the consequences on to the shoulders of other people."

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Then she turned, and blinked about her with half-dazed eyes. In front of the waggon a haze of dust floated up against the intense blueness of the sky, and under it a belt of tall, harsh grass rustled drily in the scant, hot breeze. Everything seemed white and suffused with brightness. Beyond them, the parched, grey prairie rolled back to the horizon. There was no shade anywhere, nor, so far as the eye could travel, a single speck of green.

"And this is a prairie sloo!" she said. "I had pictured a nice, cool lake where the wild duck swim. Charley is, presumably, haymaking, though I never saw it done this way before."

The dust settled a little, and, with a clashing tinkle, there came out of it three big teams and lurching machines. The grass went down before them crackling harshly, and the horses plodded on with tossing heads and whipping tails amidst a cloud of flies. Men followed behind them heaping the hay in piles, and across the mown strip of sloo more men, almost naked, were flinging the last of the mounds into a waggon. There is no need of turning and winnowing in that country. The one thing necessary is to find grass tall enough to cut, and get it home before the fires do the reaping.

The big machines came nearer with a clash and clatter and gleam of sliding knives, and Leland, swinging his team out from the grass, got down from his driving-seat.

"Where's my jacket, Tom?" he said to the man on the machine behind his.

"I expect it has gone home. You pitched it into the waggon," said Tom Gallwey, who, swinging off his hat as his team went by, plunged into the dust again.

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Leland moved forward with a deprecatory gesture as he stopped beside the waggon. He wore a coarse blue shirt and old jean trousers, both of which were smeared with black grease, on which the dust had settled, for one of the mowers had given him trouble that morning. There was dust, too, on his dripping face and bare arms, which were scarred here and there. Still, the thin attire lent a certain grace to his wiry figure, and he appeared the personification of strength and activity. From another point of view, his appearance was, however, distinctly against him, and Carrie fancied she knew what Urmston was thinking, as he sat still in his saddle, immaculate, save for a sprinkling of dust, in neat boots, straw hat, and tweed. The difference between the men would have had its effect upon her once, but now she looked down at Leland with an understanding smile.

"You have been mowing all the time?" she said.

"Since sun-up," and Leland laughed. "I couldn't give the teams more than an hour's rest, either. We have to clean this sloo up by dark."

Carrie glanced at the great belt of grass and wondered how it was to be done.

"It looks out of the question, and it's very hot," she said. "Couldn't you stop a little earlier, for once, and ride over to the Range? Mrs. Custer half expects you at supper."

She evidently wanted him to come, and Leland, who seemed to feel it, glanced back irresolutely at the sloo.

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"I'm afraid not," he said. "It's quite a way, and I haven't a horse. The others couldn't get done by dark without me, and we couldn't come back here to-morrow. You'll have to excuse me."

Carrie was displeased, though she would not show it, for she had seen the smile of satisfaction in Urmston's eyes. Appearances, she knew, counted for a good deal with him, as much, in fact, as they had once done with her, and she would sooner he had not been there when the dusty haymaker made it evident that he was unwilling to leave his work, although she had suggested that this would please her.

"I suppose it's necessary?" she said.

Leland appeared to hesitate a moment. "I must get this grass home to-night, but, if it's not too late, I would like you to drive round and pick me up. It would get me back 'most an hour earlier."

Carrie was sensible, with a little annoyance, that Urmston was watching her. "Well," she said, "I can't exactly promise. It will depend upon when Mrs. Custer lets us go."

Just then a light waggon came jolting down the opposite slope, and its driver pulled his team up when it drew even with them.

"I've some letters for Prospect, and you have saved me 'most a league's ride. That counts on a

day like this," he said.

Leland caught the packet from him, and handed one or two of the letters to Urmston. The man drove on again. As Carrie's waggon also jolted away, Leland leant against the wheel of the mower, opening those addressed to him. Gallwey, who was passing, pulled his team up and looked down at him inquiringly.

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"Anything of consequence?" he said.

Leland shrugged a weary shoulder. "The usual thing," he said. "The implement man wants his money now, though I understood he was going to wait until harvest. The fellow in Winnipeg can't sell the horses. There's a letter from the bank, too. If I purpose drawing on them further, they'd like something as security. The rest are unpleasantly big accounts from the stores."

Then he thrust the papers into his pocket with a harsh laugh. "I'm not going to straighten things out by standing here, and they want a lot."

He called to his horses, and the mower clashed on again. The dust rose and settled on his face, once more set hard and grim. As he was toiling on, with the perspiration dripping from him, Urmston rode beside Carrie's waggon, exchanging light badinage with her. Carrie was feeling a trifle hurt, but she would not have either of her companions become aware of it. Urmston, she noticed, did not open his letters. After they had been an hour at the Range, he came, with one of them in his hand, into the room where she sat. His face was flushed, and there was an anxious look in his eyes. He glanced round the shadowy room. "Where is Eveline Annersly?" he asked.

Carrie smiled absently, though something in his attitude caused her a slight uneasiness. "Looking at Mrs. Custer's turkeys, I believe," she said. "It shows her good-nature, because I don't think they appeal to her any more than they do to me."

Urmston stood a moment or two as though listening. There was no sound from the buildings outside, and the house was very still. He moved forward closer to her, and leant upon the table, his hand clenched on the letter.

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"I have been endeavouring to get rid of that insufferable Custer for the last hour," he said. "There is something I have to tell you."

"Well?" The incisive monosyllable expressed inquiry without encouragement.

"The men I came out with are going on north to Edmonton, and expect me to go with them. In fact, they have been good enough to intimate that they are astonished at my long absence, and it is evident that, if I am to go on with the thing, I must leave Prospect to-day or to-morrow."

"Well," said Carrie, with a disconcerting lack of disquietude, "you couldn't expect them to wait indefinitely."

The man gazed at her in evident astonishment. "Don't you understand? I couldn't get back here from Edmonton."

"That is tolerably evident."

Urmston looked his disappointment, but he roused himself with an effort. "Carrie," he said, "I can't go. You don't wish me to?"

Carrie looked at him steadily, though there was now a faint flush in her cheeks.

"I think it would be better if you told me exactly what you mean by that," she said.

"Is it necessary to ask me? You know that I loved you—and I love you now. If you had been happy I might have hid my feelings—at least, I would have tried—but when I find you with a ploughman husband who could never understand or appreciate you, silence becomes impossible. He cares nothing for you, and neglects you openly."

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The girl glanced down at the ring on her finger. "Still," she said, with portentous calm, "*that* implies a good deal."

Urmston grew impatient. "Pshaw!" he said hoarsely, "one goes past conventions. You never loved him in the least. How could you? It would have been preposterous."

"And I once loved you? Well, perhaps I did. But let us be rational. What is all this leading to?"

Her dispassionate quietness should have warned him, but it merely jarred on his fastidiousness. He was not then in a mood for accurate observation.

"Only that I cannot go away," he said. "This summer was meant for us. Leland thinks of nothing, cares for nothing but his farm. He has not even feeling enough to be jealous of you."

"Ah," said Carrie, while the red spot grew plainer in her cheek, "and then? A summer, after all, does not last very long."

The man appeared embarrassed and confused at the girl's hard, insistent tones.

"Go on," she said sharply. "What is to happen when the summer is gone?"

Again Urmston was silent, with the blood in his face. Carrie Leland slowly rose. For a moment

she said nothing, but he winced beneath her gaze.

"You do not know?" she said. "Well, I think I can tell you. When I had earned my husband's hate and contempt, you would go back to England. You would not even take me with you, and you would certainly go; for what would you do in this country? The life the men here lead would crush you. Of course you realised it before you came to me to-day."

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Urmston made a gesture of protest, but she silenced him with a flash from her eyes.

"I have had patience with you, because there was a time when I loved you, but you shall hear me now. If you had shown yourself masterful and willing to risk everything for me, when we were at Barrock-holme, I think I should have gone away with you and forsaken my duty; but you were cautious—and half afraid. You could not even make love boldly. Indeed, I wonder how I ever came to believe in such a feeble thing as you."

"But," said Urmston hoarsely, "you led me on."

Again Carrie silenced him. "Wait," she said. "Did you suppose that if I hated my husband and loved you still, I could have requited all that he has done for me with treachery? Do you think I have no sense of honour or any sense of shame? It was only for one reason I let you go as far as you have done. I wanted to see if there was a spark of courage or generosity in you, because I should have liked to think as well as I could of you. There was none. After the summer you—would have gone away."

She hesitated with a catch of her breath. "Reggie," she said, "do you suppose that, even if you had courage enough to suggest it, anything would induce me to leave my husband because—you—asked me to?"

The man winced again, and his face grew even hotter beneath her gaze.

"You would have done so once," he said, as though nothing else occurred to him.

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"And I should have been sorry ever since, even if I had never understood the man I have married. As it is, I would rather be Charley Leland's slave or mistress than your wife."

At last the man's eyes blazed. "You can love that ploughman, that half-tamed brute?"

Carrie laughed softly. "Yes," she said, "I love him. If it is any consolation, I think it was partly you who taught me to."

There was a moment's silence, and then Urmston, who heard footsteps in the hall, swung round as Eveline Annersly came in. She looked at them both with a comprehending smile, for she was shrewd, and their faces made comparatively plain the nature of what had taken place.

"I wonder," she said, "if I am intruding?"

"No," said Carrie. "In fact, I think Reggie would like to say good-bye to you. He is going away to-day."

"Ah," said Eveline Annersly, the twinkle still in her eyes, "I really think that is wise of him. He must be keeping the farming experts waiting. Indeed, I'm not sure it wouldn't have been more considerate if he had gone before."

Urmston said nothing, but went out to make his excuses to Custer. In another half-hour he was riding to the railroad across the prairie. Carrie watched him from the homestead until at last he sank behind the crest of a low rise. Then she went back into the house with a little sigh of relief. Eveline Annersly, who was in the room when she came in, smiled curiously.

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"I am not going back to-night. The sun has given me a headache, for one thing," she said. "Besides that, Mrs. Custer insists on keeping me for a day or two. You can drive round for Charley."

"The waggon," said Carrie, "will easily hold three."

Her companion looked at her with twinkling eyes. "I almost think two will be enough to-night."

Carrie made no answer, but did as was suggested. It was about nine o'clock that evening when she pulled her team up beside the sloo. Leland, who had found his jacket and brushed off some of the dust, was standing there beside a pile of prairie hay. There was nobody else in sight. A row of loaded waggons and teams loomed black against the sunset at the edge of the prairie. There was a fond gleam in his eyes as he looked up at Carrie.

"Eveline Annersly is staying all night," she said. "You will be worn out; there is almost a load of the hay left."

Leland looked at the big pile of grass. "We couldn't get that lot up, unfortunately. It's a long way to come back to-morrow."

"Well," said Carrie, merrily, "this waggon must have cost you a good deal, and it is one of the few things about Prospect that has never done anything to warrant its being there. I really don't think a little clean hay would harm it."

Leland appeared astonished. "You are sure you wouldn't mind?" he asked.

"Of course not! I will help you to load it if you will hand me down."

The gleam in Leland's eyes was plainer when he reached up and grasped her hands. Carrie, who remembered what had happened last time, shrank from the caress she half expected. Perhaps Leland realised it with his quick intuition, for he merely swung her down. Then she threw in the hay by the armful while he plied the fork. The soft green radiance that precedes the coming dusk hung above the prairie when he roped the load down securely. It was piled high about the driving-seat of the waggon, making a warm, fragrant resting place, into which he lifted his wife. Then, as the team moved on slowly, he turned and looked at her.

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"Thank you, my dear," he said; "that was very kind."

Carrie flushed. "Surely not, when you have so much to do. It saves you a long drive to-morrow, doesn't it? But why were you waiting? I did not promise to come round, and you could have ridden home on one of the waggons. It must be six miles."

"Well," said Leland seriously, "it seemed quite worth while to wait most of the night, even if I'd had to walk in afterwards. I knew Mrs. Annersly meant to stay, and you and I have had only one drive together."

Carrie felt her cheeks grow warm again. Her usual composure had vanished. During that other journey, she had lain half frozen in his arms. There had been snow upon the prairie then, and she had shrunk from him; but it was summer now, and all was different. The hay overhung and projected all about them, so that there was very little room on the driving-seat, and she felt her heart throbbing as she sat pressed close against his shoulder. Leland said nothing, and the waggon jolted on through the silent night to the tune of horses' hoofs, while the green transparency faded into the dusky blueness of the night.

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CHAPTER XX

AN UNDERSTANDING

A deep stillness hung over the prairie, and the stars were high and dim, while the waggon jolted on. Though the team moved slowly, Leland had apparently no wish to hurry them. A clean, aromatic smell of wild peppermint floated about the pair on the driving-seat as the faint dew damped the load behind them. They sat in a hollow of the fragrant grass, and the softness and the warmth of it were pleasant, for, as sometimes happens at that season, the night was almost chill. The other teams had vanished, and they rode on over the vast shadowy levels alone. Every rattle of the harness, every creak of jarring wheels, rang through the silence with a startling distinctness.

Some vague influence in it all reacted upon the girl, and she sat very still, pressed close against Leland's shoulder, content to be there, and almost afraid to speak lest what she should say might rudely break the charm. She knew now what she felt for the man at her side, and remembered what Eveline Annersly had said. It was fit that she should cleave to him, since they were one. Leland finally spoke:

"Urmston did not come back with you."

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"No," said Carrie, realising that the crisis was at hand, and yet almost afraid to precipitate it. "He rode in to the railroad."

Leland called to the horses before he spoke again.

"Carrie," he said slowly, "any of your friends are welcome at Prospect, and especially Mrs. Annersly; but I have felt for some little while now that I must ask you why that man is staying here so long."

The girl summoned her self-control with an effort, for she felt she must play the part she had decided on; but she felt her heart beat as she moved a little so that she could look up at her companion. He had moved, too, and though his face showed but vaguely, she could feel that his eyes were fixed upon her.

"The night you would not have Mrs. Heaton here, you said something that made me very angry, though from your point of view you were right," she said. "I think we must understand each other once for all. Do you consider it necessary to remind me of the same thing now?"

"No," said Leland, still quietly, though there was a suggestion of tension in his voice. "I was ashamed of it afterwards; I lost my temper. I know you have too much pride and honesty not to keep your bargain to the letter, and I am not in the least jealous of Urmston. You have my ring upon your hand. How could I be? Still, one has now and then to talk plainly. Urmston is a man who might take much for granted and presume. Your good name is precious to me."

"Thank you for that. You do not know that there was a time when, if circumstances had been propitious, I would have married Reggie Urmston?"

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Leland appeared to smile. "I think I knew that, too."

"And you said nothing when he came here!"

"My dear," said Leland gravely, "I had by that time perfect confidence in you. The clean pride that held you away from me would keep you safe in spite of anything that such a man might do or say."

"Well," said Carrie, with a calm dignity, "he will never come back again. I have sent him away."

She felt the man start, and saw his hands tighten on the reins.

"Carrie," he said, "you will tell me more if you wish; if not, it doesn't matter. There is another thing I want to say. I have often been sorry for you, but I felt that you would not find it quite so hard some day. That is why I waited—I think very patiently—though it was a little hard on me, too. I thought I knew what you must feel—indeed, you showed it to me—and I was horribly afraid that, if I was too hasty, I might lose you."

"And that would have troubled you?"

Leland turned again, and his voice was a trifle hoarse. "My dear, I do not understand these things. I have been too busy to worry about my feelings, but I know that, while I only admired you at Barrock-holme, something else that was different soon took hold of me, and kept on growing stronger the more I saw of you. I think it first gripped me hard the night you told me what you thought of me—though why then I don't know. Now I am sure, at least, that it will never let me go."

Then, his self-restraint failing him, he slipped an arm about her and held her tightly to him.

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"Carrie," he said harshly, "it is getting too hard for me. Do you know that now and then something almost drives me into taking you into my arms and crushing you into submission? I could do it now—the touch of you almost maddens me. This can't go on. I have felt lately that you were growing kinder and shrank from me less. After all, I am a man and nothing more. How long do you mean to keep me waiting?"

Carrie laughed softly, with a little catch of her breath. "Bend your head a little, Charley," she said, "I have something to tell you."

As he did her bidding, she, stretching up a soft, warm arm round his neck, drew his face down to hers. His hand closed convulsively on her waist.

"Charley," she said again, "it needn't go on any longer than you wish. I don't want it to. I only want you to love me now."

The man laughed almost fiercely in his exultation. For a space she lay crushed and breathless beneath his engirdling arm, with his kisses hot upon her lips. When at last his grasp relaxed, her head, with the big white hat all crushed and crumpled, was still upon his breast. Her cheeks were burning, and her blood ran riot, for she was one who did nothing by half, as she clung to him in an ecstasy of complete and irrevocable surrender. The man broke out into a flood of disjointed, half-coherent, unrestrained words.

"It was worth while waiting—even if I had waited years—though now and then you almost drove me mad," he said. "Your daintiness, your pride, the clean, hard grit that was in you, made me want to take you in my arms and break you and make you yield. Still, I knew, somehow, that was not the way with you, and I held myself in. It was hard—oh, it was hard. The beauty of you, your freshness, your beautiful little hands, even the coldness in your face, set me on fire at times. They were mine, you belonged to me, and yet I would claim nothing that went with your dislike. I wanted you to give them all to me."

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Carrie laughed, though there was a little break in her voice. "They are yours, and so am I. Only you must think them precious—and never let me go."

Then she stretched her arm up and slipped it round his neck again. "Charley, at the very first, what was it made you want to marry me?"

"Well," said Leland, with an air of reflection, "haven't you hair as softly dusky as the sky up there, and eyes so deep and clear that one can see the wholesome thoughts down in the depths of them? Haven't you hands and arms that look like alabaster, until one feels the gracious warmth beneath?"

"And a vixenish temper! If I ever show it to you, you must shake me, and shake me hard. There was a time when you did it, and left a blue mark on my shoulder; but I deserved it, and now I wouldn't mind. I would sooner have you shake me every day than never think of me. Still, you haven't told me what I asked you yet."

Leland stooped and kissed the shoulder. "When a man looks at you, he can see a hundred reasons for wanting you, and every one sufficient."

"Still, that was not all. If you do not tell me, I shall ask Aunt Eveline, and I think she knows. Don't you see that we must understand everything to-night?"

"Then it seemed to me it would be a horrible thing to marry you to Aylmer."

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Carrie drew her breath in. "Oh," she said, "I always fancied it was that, and I could love you if it was only for saving me from him." Then she broke out into a little soft laugh. "Charley, it was the wrong shoulder you kissed."

"That is very easily set right," and the man bent down again. As he looked up, he called sharply to the horses, and shook the reins.

"I wonder how long we have been waiting here?" he said. "I suppose you haven't noticed that the team has stopped?"

They rode on again, in silence seldom broken, into a land of beatific visions. With a little wistful sense of regret, they saw Prospect at last rise black and shadowy against the big birch bluff. The teamsters, however, had not gone to sleep yet, and Leland, leaving the waggon to one of them, walked silently with Carrie towards the house. He stooped and kissed her as they crossed the threshold.

"From now on, it is home," he said. "I only want to please you, and you must tell me when I fail."

They went in together, and he lighted the big lamp. "You had supper with Mrs. Custer, but that is quite a while ago, and there should be a little fire yet in the cook-shed stove," he said. "Is there anything I can make you?"

Carrie laughed as she took off the big crumpled hat and flung it on the table.

"No," she said, "you will sit still while I see what can be found. It will be my part to cook and bake and wait on you. I almost think, if it were necessary, I could drive a team, too."

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They decided it by going into the cook-shed together, and, late as it was, Carrie wasted a good deal of flour attempting to make flap-jacks under her husband's direction, achieving a general disorder that Mrs. Nesbit surveyed with astonishment next morning. But the good soul's astonishment grew when she came upon Carrie setting the table in the big room, at least half an hour before Leland came in for his early breakfast.

"I guess you're not going to want me much longer, and it's hardly likely that Charley Leland will, either," she said.

Carrie's face flushed. "Oh, yes," she said, "you must stay here and teach me everything that a farmer's wife ought to know. I am afraid you will be a long while doing it."

The hard-featured woman smiled at her in a very kindly fashion.

"You're going to find it all worth while," she said.

Carrie set about it that morning, and her sympathy with Mrs. Custer grew stronger with every hour she spent in Mrs. Nesbit's company, for it was evident that there was a great deal a woman could do at Prospect, too. Indeed, although she had already taken a spasmodic interest in the work, what she was taught before evening left her more than a little confused and by no means pleased with herself. It was disconcerting to be brought suddenly face to face with the realities of life and the conviction that things did not run smoothly of themselves. She realised, for the first time, almost with dismay, that, by coldly standing aside while the others toiled, she had made her husband's burden heavier than it need have been. She had, perhaps not altogether unnaturally, fallen into the habit of assuming that it was only fit that all she desired should be obtained for her, and had never inquired about the effort it entailed; but, as this point of view did not seem quite warranted now, she resolved that the future should be different. Finally realising her obligations, she did not shrink from the responsibility.

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Eveline Annersly, coming home that evening, found her sitting, deep in thought, by the window of her room, a new softness in her eyes. She drew up a chair close by, and sat looking at her in a shrewd way that the girl appeared to find disconcerting.

"Carrie," she said, "I wonder if you know that you look quite as well in that simple dress as you do in your usual evening one? Still, your hair is a little ruffled. Surely you haven't been rubbing it against somebody's shoulder?"

Carrie Leland blushed crimson, which was somewhat remarkable, as it was a thing she was by no means in the habit of doing.

"Well," she said with a little musical laugh, "there was no reason why I shouldn't. It was my husband's."

Then she rose impulsively, and, drawing up a footstool, sank down beside Eveline Annersly, and slipped an arm about her.

"I think you know," she said. "At least, you have done what you could to bring it about for ever so long. We are friends at last, Charley and I."

"That is pleasant to hear. Still, I'm not sure it would quite satisfy Charley. Haven't you gone any further?"

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Carrie's face was hidden as she replied, in a voice that quavered a bit. "I think we are lovers, too," she murmured.

"Well," said her companion, "if he had known all I do, you might have been that some time ago. In

fact, it would have pleased me if he had slapped you occasionally. If you had made him believe what you tried, it is very probable that you would never have forgiven yourself. But I think you ought to be more than lovers."

Feeling a tremor of emotion run through the girl, she stooped and kissed her half-hidden cheek. Carrie looked up.

"Charley is my husband—and all that is worth having to me," she said. "He is sure of it at last. I have told him so."

She sat silent for a minute, and then turned a little and took out a letter.

"It's from Jimmy," she said. "It was among Charley's papers, and he gave it to me when we came home."

"He wants something?" said Mrs. Annersly, drily.

"Yes," and Carrie's voice was quietly contemptuous. "Jimmy, it seems, is in difficulties again. If he hadn't been, he would not have written. Of course, it is only a loan."

"You have a banking account in Winnipeg."

"I have. I owe it to my husband's generosity, and I shall probably want it very soon. Do you suppose that, while Charley is crushed with anxiety and working from dawn to dusk, I would send Jimmy a penny?"

"Well," said Eveline Annersly, reflectively, "I really don't fancy it would be advisable, but this is rather a sudden change on your part. Not long ago you wouldn't let me say a word against anybody at Barrock-holme."

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Carrie laughed in a somewhat curious fashion. "Everything has changed. All that is mine I want for Charley, and, while he needs it, there is nothing for anybody else."

She stopped for a moment. "Aunt Eveline, there are my mother's pearls and diamonds, which I think I should have had. I did not like to ask for them, but I always understood they were to come to me when I was married. I don't quite understand why my father never mentioned them."

Mrs. Annersly looked thoughtful. "I am under very much the same impression. In fact, I am almost sure they should have been handed to you. Still, what could you do with them here?"

"I may want them presently."

"In that case you had better write and ask for them very plainly."

Carrie rose, with a determined expression in her face. "Well, I must go down," she said. "Charley will be here in a few minutes. I see the teams coming back from the sloos."

Eveline Annersly sat thoughtfully still. The jewels in question were, she knew, of considerable value. For that very reason, she was far from sure that Carrie could ever have the good-will of anybody at Barrock-holme if she insisted on her rights of possession.

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CHAPTER XXI

A WILLING SACRIFICE

Three weeks had slipped away since the evening Carrie Leland had asked about her mother's jewels, when she and Eveline Annersly once more referred to them as they sat in her room, a little before the supper hour. The window was wide open, and the blaze of sunlight that streamed in fell upon Carrie as she took up a letter from the little table before her.

"Only a line or two to say the casket has been sent," she said, with a half-suppressed sigh. "One could almost fancy they did not care what had become of me at Barrock-holme. I might have passed out of their lives altogether."

"I'm not sure it's so very unusual in the case of a married woman," said her companion, a trifle drily. "Besides, it is quite possible that your father was not exactly pleased at having to give the jewels up. In fact, it may have been particularly inconvenient for him to do so. They are worth a good deal of money."

"Still, they really belong to me."

"Yes," said Eveline Annersly, "they evidently do, or you would not have got them. Of course, it would be a more usual thing for them to have gone to Jimmy's wife when he married, but they were your mother's, and, as you know, they came from her family. It was her wish that you should have them, though I was never quite sure it was mentioned in her will. In fact, to be candid, I am a little astonished that you have got them."

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Carrie's face flushed.

"Aunt," she said, "I don't like to think of it, and I would not admit it to anybody else, but I felt what you are suggesting when I wrote for them. Still, I would have had them, even at the cost of breaking with them all at Barrock-holme."

"I expected a break. Hadn't you better open the casket?"

"In a few minutes," said Carrie, leaving the room.

She wore a dinner-gown when she returned. Sitting down at the table, she opened the little metal-bound box before her. There was an inner box, and, when she opened that in turn, the sunlight struck a blaze of colour from the contents of the little velvet trays. Carrie looked at them with a curious softness in her eyes. When she turned to her companion, however, there was a lingering wistfulness in her smile.

"I can't resist putting them on—just this once," she said. "I shall probably never do it again."

Her companion watched her gravely as she placed a diamond crescent in her dusky hair, and then hung a string of pearls about her neck. They were exceptionally beautiful, but it was the few rubies that followed them and the gleam of the same stones set in the delicate bracelet the girl clasped on her wrist that roused Eveline Annersly, who had seen them before, to a little gasp of admiration. The blood-red stones shone with a wonderful lustre on the polished whiteness of Carrie's neck and arm.

"They were, of course, never meant for a necklet, and your mother had always intended to have them properly set, but I suppose money was scarce at Barrock-holme then," she said. "You look positively dazzling, but you carry them well, my dear."

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Carrie turned to the mirror in front of her, and surveyed herself for a minute with a curious gravity. Then the little wistful look once more crept into her eyes. After all, she had been accustomed to the smoother side of life, and the beauty of the gems appealed to her. She had worn some of them once or twice before, and had seen them stir men's admiration and other women's longing at brilliant functions in the Old Country. She also knew that they became her wonderfully well, and yet it was scarcely likely she would put them on again. Then she heard a little gasp, and, turning suddenly, saw Mrs. Nesbit gazing at her from the doorway in bewildered admiration.

"The boys are coming in. Shall I have the table set for supper?" she said.

"Not yet," said Carrie. "You might ask Mr. Leland to come up. I want him."

Mrs. Nesbit went out, apparently still lost in wonder. Carrie turned to her companion impulsively.

"I should like Charley to see me as I am—for once," she said.

Five minutes later, Eveline Annersly slipped away as Leland came in, dressed in worn and faded jean. He gave a start of astonishment and a look that almost suggested pain when Carrie turned to him. She looked imperial in the long, graceful dress. The diamonds in her dusky hair glistened crystal-clear, and the rubies gleamed on the polished ivory of her neck; but her eyes were more wonderful than any gem in their depths of tenderness. Then the man saw himself in the mirror, bronzed and hot and dusty, with hard hands and broken nails, and the stain of the soil upon him. Another glance at her, and he turned his eyes away.

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"Aren't you pleased?" said Carrie.

Leland turned again, slowly, with a little sigh, one of his brown hands tightly clenched.

"You are beautiful, my dear," he said, "but, if you were old and dressed in rags, you would always be that to me. With those things shining on you, you are wonderful, but it hurts me to see them."

"Why?"

"They make the difference between us too plain. You should wear them always. It was what you were meant for, and, when I married you, I had a notion that I might be able to give you such things some day and take you where other people wear them. Everything, however, is against me now. We may not even keep Prospect, and you are only the wife of a half-ruined prairie farmer."

Carrie held her arms out. "I wouldn't be anything else if I could. You know that, too. Come and kiss me, Charley, and never say anything of the kind again."

The man hesitated, and she guessed that he was thinking of his dusty jean.

"Have I lost my attractiveness that you need asking twice?" she said.

Leland came towards her, and she slipped an arm about his neck, regardless of the costly dress. Taking up his hard, brown hand, she looked tenderly at the broken nails.

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"Ah," she said, "it has worked so hard for me. Do you think I don't know why you toil late and early this year, and never spend a cent on anything that is not for my pleasure? I must have cost you a good deal, Charley."

She saw the blood rise into the man's face, and laughed softly. "Oh, I know it all. Once I tried to

hate you for it—and now, if it hadn't made it so hard for you, I should be almost glad. Still, Charley, I would do almost anything to make you feel that—it was worth while."

"My dear," said Leland hoarsely, "I have never regretted it, and I would not even if I had to turn teamster and let Prospect go, except for the trouble it would bring you."

Carrie laughed softly. "Still, it will never come to that. This hand is too firm and capable to let anything go, and I fancy I can do something, too. After all, I do not think Mrs. Custer is very much stronger or cleverer than I am."

She pushed him gently away from her. "Now go and get ready for supper. I will be down presently."

Leland went away with glad obedience. When Eveline Annersly came in later, she found Carrie once more attired very plainly, and the casket locked. Her eyes were a trifle hazy, but she looked up with a smile.

"I shall not put them on again, but I do not mind," she said. "They will go to ploughing and harrowing next season. There is something to be done beforehand, and I want you to come in to the railroad station with me to-morrow."

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They went down to supper, during which Carrie was unusually talkative. When Eveline Annersly left them after the meal was over, she turned to her husband.

"Charley," she said, "you could get along alone for two or three days, if I went into Winnipeg?"

"I could," said Leland. "Still, I wouldn't like it. But what do you want to go there for?"

"Well," said Carrie, reflectively, "there are two or three things I want, and one or two I have to do—business things at the bank. I had a letter from Barrock-holme, you know. I suppose those bankers are really trustworthy people?"

Leland laughed. "Oh, yes, I think they could be trusted with anything you were likely to put into their hands."

"Well," said Carrie, "perhaps I will tell you what it is by and by. In the meanwhile, since I am going to-morrow, there are several things I have to see to."

Starting next morning with Eveline Annersly, she was on the following day ushered into the manager's room at Leland's bank. The gentleman who sat there appeared a trifle astonished when he saw her, as though he had scarcely expected to see the stamp of refinement and station on Leland's wife. He drew out a chair for her, and urbanely asked what he could do for her. Carrie laid a casket and a small bundle of papers upon the table.

"I think you are acquainted with my husband?" she said.

"Certainly," said the banker. "We have had the pleasure of doing business with Mr. Leland of Prospect for a good many years."

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"Then," said Carrie, decisively, "you are on no account to tell him about any business you may do for me—that is, unless I give you permission to do so."

The banker concealed any astonishment he may have felt, merely saying that it was his part to fall in with his clients' wishes. Carrie held out a pass-book.

"I suppose I could have this money any time I wished?" she said.

"Certainly. You have only to write a cheque for it."

Carrie opened a paper, and handed it to him. "I have had it all explained to me, but I am afraid I don't understand it very well," she said. "Until I was married I could get only a little of the money as my trustees gave it to me, and they put the rest into an English bank for me. I have the book here. You will see how much the dividends and interest come to every year."

The banker studied the document carefully. Then he took the pass-book she handed him. "Well," he said, "you can do whatever you like with it now. Quite a sum of money has accumulated."

"I could put it into your bank here?"

"Of course. I should be glad to arrange it for you. You would also get more interest for it than you seem to have done in England."

"Then I want you to do it. You lend people money. I wonder if you could let me have as much now as I would get in the next four or five years. Of course, you would charge me for doing it."

The banker smiled a little, and shook his head as he glanced at the document. "You will excuse my mentioning that the interest on the money involved is only to be paid—to you."

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"Ah," said Carrie, "of course, I might die, and then, I remember, it would go back again. Still, that only makes what I want to do more necessary. I suppose I could make over to my husband all the money there is in the English bank and anything else that really belongs to me? That is, I could put it into his account here? You see, I don't want him to know—anything about it for a little while."

The banker reflected. He had done business for years with Leland and considered him a friend. This dainty woman's devotion to her husband appealed to him. He decided that he might, for once, go a little further than was usual from a business point of view. "Well," he said, reflectively, "I think I should wait a little. If you kept the money in your own name, you could hand him as much as you thought advisable at any time it appeared necessary. On the whole, I fancy that would be wiser."

"Why?"

Again the banker pondered. Nobody knew better than he how many of the wheat-growers were near ruin that year, and he had naturally an accurate notion of what would probably happen to Leland when, after harvest, the wheat of the West was thrown train-load by train-load upon a lifeless market.

"I think there are a good many reasons why it is sound advice I am offering you. For one thing, wheat is still going down, you see."

Carrie made a little gesture of comprehension, for financial difficulties had formed a by no means infrequent topic at Barrock-holme. "Yes," she said quietly, "I understand. You will get the money and put it to my name. But there is another thing. Will you please open that casket?"

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The man did so, and appeared astonished when he saw its contents. "These things are very beautiful," he said.

"You could lend me part of their value?" asked Carrie, with a little flush in her face.

The man looked thoughtful. The smaller banking houses in the West are usually willing to handle any business they can get, but precious gems are not a commodity with which they are intimately acquainted.

"They would have to be valued, and I fancy that could only be done in Montreal," he said. "After getting an expert's opinion, we could, I think, advance you a reasonable proportion of what he considered them worth. Shall I have it done?"

"Of course," said Carrie, and went out ten minutes later with a sense of satisfaction. She found Eveline Annersly waiting, and smiled as she greeted her. "I have been arranging things, and perhaps I can help Charley, after all. I am afraid he will want it," she said. "Now, if you wouldn't mind very much, we can get the west-bound train this afternoon. I am anxious to get back to Prospect again."

Eveline Annersly would have much preferred to spend that night in a comfortable hotel, instead of in a sleeping-car, but she made no protest. After lunch, they spent an hour or two in the prairie city, waiting until the train came in. Ridged with mazy wires and towering telegraph-poles, and open to all winds, Winnipeg stands at the side of its big, slow river in the midst of a vast sweep of plain. Boasting of few natural attractions, there is the quick throb of life in its streets. As Carrie and her aunt made their way through bustling crowds, past clanging cars, they gradually observed an undertone of slackness in the superficial activity about them. The faces they met were sombre, and there were few who smiled. The lighthearted rush of a Western town was missing. Loungers hung about the newspaper offices, and bands of listless immigrants walked the streets aimlessly. Carrie had heard at Prospect that it was usually difficult in the Northwest to get men enough to do the work, and this air of leisure puzzled her.

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There was, however, a reason for this lack of enterprise. Winnipeg lives by its trade in wheat, selling at a profit to the crowded East, and scattering its store-goods broadcast across the prairie. Just then, however, the world appeared to possess a sufficiency of wheat and flour, and the great mills were grinding half-time or less, while it happened frequently that Western farmers, caught by the fall in values, could not meet their bills. When this happens, there is always trouble from the storekeepers and dealers in implements who have supplied them throughout the year. Carrie caught the despondent tone, wondering why she did so, since she felt that it would not have impressed her a little while ago. Perhaps it was because she had then looked upon the toilers with an uncomprehending pity that was half disdain, and she had since gained not only sympathy but appreciation. She stopped outside the newspaper office where a big placard was displayed.

"Smitten Dakota wails," it read. "Crops devastated. Thunder and hail. Ice does the reaping in Minnesota."

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"Oh," she said. "I must have a paper."

Eveline Annersly smiled a little. It was between the hours of issue, and the wholesale office did not look inviting, but Carrie went in, and a clerk, who gazed at the very dainty lady with some astonishment, gave her a paper.

"Now," she said, "we will go on to the depôt. I must sit down and read the thing."

By the time she had mastered the gist of it, the big train was rolling out with her amidst a doleful clanging of the locomotive bell. It was momentous enough. The hail, which now and then sweeps the Northwest, had scourged the Dakotas and part of Minnesota, spreading devastation where it went. Meteorologists predicted that the disturbance would probably spread across the frontier. Carrie laid down the paper and glanced out with a little shudder of apprehension at the sliding

prairie, into which town and wires and mills were sinking. She was relieved to see that there hung over it a sweep of cloudless blue.

"There are hundreds ruined, and whole crops destroyed," she said. "Perhaps the men who sowed them worked as hard as Charley. It would be dreadful if it came to us."

"I am afraid it would," said Eveline Annersly. "Still, I don't think it would have troubled you when you first came out. That is not so very long ago, is it?"

Carrie smiled. "I think I have grown since then," she said.

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CHAPTER XXII

HAIL

A thin crescent moon hung low in the western sky. The prairie was wrapped in silent shadows. Leland stood outside the homestead, with the bridle of an impatient horse in his hand, and talked with his wife. There was only one light in the house behind them, and everything was very still, but Leland knew that two men who could be trusted to keep good watch were wide awake that night. The barrel of a Marlin rifle hung behind his shoulders, glinting fitfully when it caught the light as he moved. Without thinking of what he was doing, he fingered the clip of the sling.

"The moon will be down in half an hour, and it will be quite dark before I cross the ravine near Thorwald's place," he said. "Jim Thorwald is straight, and standing by the law, but none of us are quite sure of all of his boys. Anyway, we don't want anybody to know who's riding to the outpost."

Carrie laid her hand upon his arm. "I suppose you must go, this once at least."

"Of course!" said Leland with a smile. "If I'm wanted, I must go again. The trouble's spreading."

"Then," said Carrie, "why can't they bring more troopers in? Why did you ever have anything to do with it, Charley?"

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"It seemed necessary. A man has to hold on to what is his."

Carrie's fingers tightened on his arm. "Perhaps it is so; I suppose it must be; but, after all, I don't think that was your only reason. I mean, when you started the quarrel. No, you needn't turn away. I want you to look at me."

"It's dark, my dear, and I'm glad it is. I don't want to talk of those times, and if it were light enough to see you, I'm afraid it would melt the resolution out of me."

"Still," Carrie persisted, "you know you first quarrelled with the rustlers because you were angry with me."

Leland laughed softly. "Well, perhaps that was the reason, though I would sooner believe it was because I recognised what I owed the State."

"But it is all different—you are not in the least angry with me now?"

The moonlight was very dim, and showed no more than the pale white oval of her face; but Leland felt the appeal in her voice, and knew that it was also in her eyes.

"My dear," he said quietly, "how could I be?"

Carrie lifted her hand and laid it on his shoulder. "Charley, I can't stop you now, but I want you to promise you will not go back again. Do you know that I sit still, shivering, when darkness comes while you are away, trying not to think of what you may be doing? I daren't think. Can't you understand, Charley, that I have only you?"

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Feeling how hard it was to leave her, and fearing that further tenderness from her might weaken his firm purpose, he sought refuge in a frivolous retort.

"There are still a few of your relatives at Barrock-holme," he said.

"They never write me. Perhaps I couldn't expect them to. I thought you knew that I had offended them."

"Offended them?"

Carrie laughed a trifle harshly. "Oh," she said, "it is a wife's duty to take her husband's part; but, after all, that is not the question. I hadn't meant to mention it. It doesn't matter in the least."

"Well," said Leland, "I almost think it does. Anyway, if it worries you. What have you been falling out with them over, Carrie?"

"That is not your business. They don't care about me now, but you do."

Leland had only one free hand, but he slipped it round her waist. She sighed contentedly as she felt his protecting clasp.

"Charley, you will not go back again?" she said once more.

The man drew his arm away. Though she could scarcely see his face, he appeared to be looking down upon her gravely.

"It is a little hard not to do what you ask me straight away, but I think you can understand," he said. "Whatever I went into the thing for, I am in it now. Practically, I'm leader. It is not the Sergeant the boys look to, but me, and I'm not quite sure they would have kept the thing up if I hadn't worried them into doing it. Still, they'll go on now, and they would only think of two reasons if I backed down. Would you like them to fancy the rustlers had bought me over, or made me afraid of them?"

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"Could any one think that?" and Carrie laughed scornfully, though her voice grew suddenly soft again. "It wouldn't matter in the least to me what anybody said."

"Well," said Leland gravely, "I 'most think it would, and I should like it to. Anyway, if I backed down, it would be because I was afraid. In fact, I'm afraid now, though I never used to be. It's a little difficult to tell you this, though you know it, but, when I stirred the boys up, I could not be sure you would ever be what you are to me. It didn't seem likely then, but I made no conditions when the rest stood in with me. Now I think you see I can't go back on them."

Carrie made a little nod of agreement, and, with an effort, repressed a sigh, for she knew that she had failed. Her husband's code was simple, and, perhaps, crude, but it was, at least, inflexible. After all, honour and duty are things well within the comprehension of very simple men. Indeed, it is often the case that, where principles are concerned, the simplest men have the clearest vision.

"Ah," she said, with something like a sob, "then you must go. But stand still a minute, Charley. I want to see if the clip I bought you in the Winnipeg gun-shop is working properly."

Leland smiled as she pressed a little clasp and then, dropping one hand smartly, caught the rifle as the sling fell apart. Carrie had changed suddenly and curiously. The pride that was in her had awakened, and she was at one with her husband and wholly practical.

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"It is ever so much quicker than passing it over your shoulder; and, after all, you must go," she said.

She stretched up her arms and kissed him. When the man had swung himself into the saddle, she looked long after him, with eyes that were hazy. When he became a blur in the distance, she went slowly to the house, head proudly erect. There Eveline Annersly greeted her.

"My dear," she said, "you need not tell me. You have been trying to hold your husband back, and you have failed. The thing was out of the question. You might have known."

Carrie made a little half-wistful gesture, though there was a faint glow in her eyes. "Yes, I did what I could, and now I shall not rest until he comes back again. Still, I think I deserve it, and I'm not sure that I would have him different. I think nothing would change Charley. I used to wonder more than I do now how he, who was born on the prairie, came to have all the real essential things which were not in any of us at Barrock-holme."

Eveline Annersly's eyes sparkled, and her manner was sardonic. "It's not very explicit, but I think I know what you mean. Haven't you lost your faith in the old fetish yet? Men are men—good, bad, and indifferent—the world over, and, though it would be rather nice to believe it, we haven't, and never had, a monopoly in our own class of what you call the essentials. Indeed, I'm not quite sure one couldn't go a little further."

She was standing near the open window, with the light, which was low, some distance away from her. Turning, she drew Carrie within the heavy curtains. "The very old and the very new are apt to meet," she said. "There is an example yonder."

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Carrie looked out into the soft moonlight, and saw a mounted figure cut against the sky on the crest of a low rise. It was indistinct and shadowy, but, as she gazed, she twice caught the gleam of the pale cold light on steel, and knew it for the flash of a rifle-barrel.

"Oh," she said, "since I came to this country I have felt it too. That was how the border spears rode out six hundred years ago. . . . Of course, you were right a little while ago. I think the things that are essential must always have been the same—primitive and unchangeable. Faith and courage have always been needed, as they are needed still. After all, we cannot get away from death and toil and pain."

The lonely figure vanished into the night, and, as her companion moved away, Carrie let the curtain fall behind her with a little sigh. "It is getting late, and I can only wait and try to think there is no danger, until he comes back to me. No doubt others have done it, back through all the centuries."

She went out, but Eveline Annersly sat a while thoughtfully by the open window. What she had expected had at last come to pass, and she had the satisfaction which does not always attend the efforts of the matrimonial schemer; for there was no longer any doubt that Carrie Leland loved

her husband. Once more, as Nature will often have it, like had drawn to unlike, with a fusion of discordant qualities in indissoluble and harmonious union, that what the one lacked the other might supply. The pair she had brought together were no longer two but one, which, while she was quite aware that it did not always happen, was, when it did, like the springing up of the wheat—a mystery and a miracle.

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Eveline Annersly was old enough to know that there are many mysteries, but that by love alone man may come nearest to their comprehension.

Then she remembered that it was getting late, and, leaving the window open, for the night was hot and still, sought her room, and in another half-hour was sound asleep. She had slept several hours, when she was awakened by a queer sound that seemed to come from outside through the open door. It was a dull noise, which, accustomed as she had grown to the beat of hoofs, suggested a company of mounted men riding up out of the prairie. The sound kept increasing, until she could have fancied that it was made by a regiment, and then suddenly swelled into the roar of a brigade of cavalry going by on the gallop. The house seemed to reel as under a blow, the doors swung to with a crash, and there was a clatter of things hurled down in the adjoining room. Then she rose and flung on a dressing-gown, and, crossing the room, stopped when she had clutched the door handle, almost afraid to open it, bewildered by the indescribable tumult. At last a gleam of light appeared between the chinks. Mustering courage to open the door, she saw Carrie standing in the room, half dressed, with a candle in her hand. That was just for a moment, for the feeble gleam went out, and she groped her way through black darkness towards the girl.

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"What is it?" she gasped.

"The hail!" said Carrie, hoarsely. "Come with me. We must shut the window quick."

It cost them both an effort, and Carrie was some little time lighting the lamp when they had accomplished it. Then Eveline Annersly sank into the nearest chair, with her arm about the shoulders of the girl who knelt beside her. Even with the windows shut, the lamplight flickered, and, when it fell upon her, Carrie's face showed set and white.

"Ah," she said, "the wheat! It will all be cut down by morning, and Charley ruined."

It was a minute or two before Eveline Annersly quite understood her, for there was just then a deafening crash of thunder, and, after it, the stout wooden building appeared to rock at the onslaught of an icy wind that struck through every crevice with a stinging chill. The hail roared on walls and shingled roof with a bewildering din. Then the uproar slackened a little, and, as she glanced towards the melting ice which had beaten into the room, it seemed to her scarcely possible that Leland's crop could have escaped disaster. She had never seen hail like that in England; in fact, it scarcely seemed hail at all, but big lumps of ice, and the crash of it upon the roof was like the roar upon a beach of surf-rolled stones.

The sound of it, and the wild wailing of the gale, sapped her courage; so she understood the strained look in Carrie's eyes. There are times when men, as well as women, stand appalled by the elemental fury, and, shaking off all restraint that a complex civilisation may have laid upon them, become wholly human and primitive again. Carrie was half crouching at her aunt's feet, gazing up at her with wild, fierce eyes. Eveline Annersly shuddered a little as she glanced at her.

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"Will the house stand?" she gasped.

The girl's laugh rang harshly through the roar of the hail. "I don't know. What does that matter, anyway? Can't you understand? The wheat will all be cut down. I have ruined Charley."

Then there was a lull for a minute or two, and Carrie, reaching up a hand, gripped her companion's arm.

"Did you ever hear how much I cost my husband?" she said.

Terrified as she was, Eveline Annersly started at the question. It was not expressed delicately, but, after all, there was no doubt that the girl's marriage had been more or less a matter of bargaining. "Of course not," she said.

"I don't know, either, but I'm sure it was ever so much," and Carrie's fingers trembled on her arm, though her eyes were fierce. "In one way, I am glad it was. I like to feel that he was willing to offer everything that was his for me. It isn't in the least degrading to belong to Charley Leland, however I came into his possession. Not in the least. How could it be? Still, once it seemed horrible even to think of it."

She stopped a minute with a little indrawing of her breath. "Besides, I am glad in another way, because, if he is really ruined, I am going to get all I cost him back again. Jimmy and my father would call it a loan."

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Eveline Annersly was distinctly startled, though she understood that all restraint had been flung aside, and Carrie Leland had responded to the influence of this storm that had brought her face to face with a crisis in her husband's affairs, the raw human nature in her had come uppermost, and she was for the time being merely a woman with primitive passions raised, ready to fight for her mate. It was, her companion recognised, a thing that not infrequently happened—a part, indeed, of Nature's scheme that had a higher warrant; but, for all that, she was sensible again that there was in the girl's set face something from which people of fastidious temperament, who

had never felt the strain, might feel inclined to shrink.

"Carrie," she said, "the thing is out of the question. They are your father and brother. You cannot force them into an open rupture. You must put it out of your mind."

The girl gripped her arm cruelly. "One must choose sometimes, and I am my husband's flesh and blood. Once that seemed a curious fancy, repugnant too, but it is real now—one of the great real things to Charley and me."

Eveline Annersly said nothing, and the wind beat upon the house as the girl went on. "Aunt," she said, "before Charley is ruined, I will make them repay the loan. They would have to if I insisted, for they would never dare let me tell that tale."

Once more her laugh rang harshly through the uproar of the hail. "Oh," she said, "Charley would pour out his blood for me, and what do I owe my father and Jimmy but a badge of shame?" [Pg 258]

She was shaking with passion and very white in face. Eveline Annersly at last realised how deeply the shame had bitten before love had come to lessen the smart of it. The girl's temperament had been, as she knew, distinctly virginal, and it was, perhaps, not astonishing, under the circumstances, that she had at first shrunk from her husband almost with hatred, and certainly with instinctive repulsion. Indeed, it was clear to Eveline Annersly that had not Leland been what he was, a man accustomed to restraint, she would in all probability have continued to hate him until one of them died. Yet the contrast between the girl who had always borne herself with a chilling serenity at Barrock-holme and the passionate woman who crouched at her side was a very wonderful thing.

Then suddenly the wind fell, and the sound of the hail commenced to die away. It no longer roared upon the shingles, but sank in a long diminuendo, drawing further and further away across the prairie. There was a deep impressive stillness as it ceased altogether.

Carrie rose abruptly. "I'm going out," she said in a strained voice. "Are you coming too?"

Eveline Annersly had little wish to go. The storm had left her shaken and unwilling to move, but she forced herself to get up, for it seemed that Carrie might have need of her. So they went out together. There was now a little light in the sky, and the bluff showed up black and sharp against it. The air was fresh and chill. Carrie, however, noticed nothing as she moved swiftly through the wheat, through the melting ice that lay thickly upon the sod. Other shadowy figures were also moving in the same direction, and there was a murmur of voices when at last she stopped. [Pg 259]

"It's Mrs. Leland," said somebody, and the group of men drew back a little.

Then Carrie caught her breath with a sob, for the tall wheat had gone, and, so far as she could see, ruin was spread across the belt of ploughing. The green blades lay smashed and torn upon the beaten soil. The crop had vanished under the dread reaping of the hail. The light was growing clearer, and it seemed to Eveline Annersly, who remembered how the roar had suggested the beat of horses' hoofs, that instead of a brigade of cavalry, an army division, with guns and transport, had passed that way through the grain. Then something in the fancy struck her as especially apposite, and she turned to Carrie, who stood rigid, as though turned to stone.

"Look!" she said; "it isn't everywhere the same."

A man came up, and she recognised him as Gallwey. He apparently heard her, for he beckoned to them.

"Will you come forward, Mrs. Leland?" he said. "We have a good deal to be thankful for."

They went with him a hundred yards or so. Then Carrie gasped at what she saw in the growing light of dawn.

"Oh," she cried joyously, "it hasn't reached the rest of it!"

"No," said Gallwey, "we are on the dividing line. I don't know how many bushels it has reaped, but, by comparison, it is not enough to worry about. A little wonderful. Still, I believe it's not unusual, and I have seen very much the same thing once before." [Pg 260]

"Is there no more of the wheat damaged?" asked Carrie, and there was still a tension in her voice.

"Not a blade," said Gallwey. "I've been all round."

Then all the strength seemed to leave the girl. Moving shakily, with her hand on Eveline Annersly's arm, she turned towards the house, as the pearly greyness crept into the eastern sky. Eveline Annersly said nothing, for she could feel that her companion was trembling, and hear her catch her breath. Carrie stopped when they reached the homestead, and looked eastward with tear-dimmed eyes.

"Ah," she said, "I wonder why this favour was shown me. I felt I had ruined Charley a little while ago."

Then she pulled herself together. "Aunt Eveline," she said softly, "did you ever hate and despise yourself?"

Eveline Annersly said nothing, but she smiled with comprehension in her eyes, for she understood what was in Carrie Leland's mind.

The night was still dark, and there was not then or afterwards any sign of hail when Sergeant Grier halted his little force under the Blackfoot Ridge. There were, in all, eight of them, excellently mounted, and most of them rode with a magazine rifle slung across their shoulders. In front of them a deep ravine wound away into the Ridge, which, though sometimes called a mountain, consisted of a long, broken rise, perhaps two hundred feet above the level of the rest of the prairie. Stunted birches, and, where the grounds were moister, a dense growth of willows, clothed its sides. Behind the first rise lay a rolling, deeply fissured plateau, lined here and there with trees. It stretched away before them, a black and shadowy barrier, and Sergeant Grier sat with his hand upon his hip, looking at it reflectively.

"I guess your news can be relied on, Mr. Leland?" he said.

Leland patted his fidgeting horse. "I wouldn't have worried you with it unless I had felt tolerably sure," he said. "Two waggons, driven by strangers, passed through the Cannersly settlement three days ago. I don't know what was in them, but they were full of something, and I have my notion as to what it was. The same night four men, who asked about those waggons, rode into Cannersly. They stayed there just five minutes, and that appeared significant to me."

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The Sergeant sat silent a moment, and then turned to the rest.

"Boys," he said, "I've been worrying the thing out most of the way. The whisky boys have friends round Barber, and they'd get pack-horses there. West of the settlement, the folks are shy of them, and it's easy figuring they'd push on to get up north, beyond my reach. Well, it would cost them a day to work a traverse round the mountain, and that's why I'm putting down my stake on their coming through. There's only one good trail, and we're here to block it; but a man who knew the way might bring them out by the Willow Coulee. I guess it's not more than two miles away." He raised his voice a little. "Trooper Standish, you and Tom Gallwey will ride up the coulee, and lie by in the old herder's hut. If you hear anything, a shot will bring us in at a gallop. Trooper Cornet, you'll push on straight ahead for half an hour with Mr. Custer, and hide your horses clear of the trail. I guess once the boys get into the mountain they're going to have some trouble getting out again."

The troopers saluted, and four shadowy men melted into the darkness. When they passed out of hearing, the Sergeant swung himself from the saddle.

"Lead your horses well back among the trees, boys, and tether them," he said. "Then we'll camp down here. I figure we're not going to see the whisky boys before the morning."

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They did his bidding. Presently Leland and one or two of the others lay down among the first of the birches. The Sergeant sat close by, with his back to one of the trees, his pipe in his hand.

"It's 'bout time we got in a blow," he said. "Things are going bad, and, with the new country opening up north, I can't get more men. Now, we wouldn't be long running off the regular whisky men; the trouble is that every blamed tough between here and the frontier is standing in with them, and, unless you catch him out at night, you've nothing to show against him. When he comes home, he's a harmless settlement loafer, or an industrious pre-emptor. A good year would kill the thing, but I guess there's more in whisky than wheat, at present figures."

"There's more in running off horses," said one of the others. "The boys get them for nothing, and I've lost three of mine. How much have they taken out of you altogether, Charley?"

"Most of four or five thousand dollars, one way or another, and I have a notion they've not done with me yet. In fact, it seems to me that either the whisky boys or I will have to get out of this part of the prairie."

The Sergeant nodded. "It will be the whisky boys," he said. "You can bluff the law for awhile, if you're smart enough, but it's quite hard to keep it up, and the first mistake you make, it's got you sure. In another way, Mr. Leland's right. I'd have done nothing with my few troopers if he hadn't brought you in. We have nothing to raise trouble over—a few steers and horses missing, a grass fire raised. They're things that happen all the time. The whisky boys know it as well as I do, and, since I can't get more troopers, it means that what is done must be done by you. They know that, too, and it's running up quite a big account against the man who's leading you."

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There was a little murmur of concurrence, and Leland laughed.

"Well," he said, "there's a *per contra* claim, and I fancy it's going to be settled by-and-bye. I've had about enough to pull against this season, and I don't feel kind towards the men who have made it harder still for me."

Though he calmly filled his pipe, one or two of those who heard him fancied that the reckoning he looked forward to would be a somewhat grim one when it came. Leland of Prospect was, as they were aware, not the man to submit patiently to an injury, and his quietness had its significance. Still, he was only one man, and his enemies were many—men who struck shrewdly in the dark, and left no sign to show who they were. None of those who rode with him envied their unofficial leader.

In the meantime, Gallwey and the young trooper picked their way along the edge of the bluff. The night was dark and hazy, and there were no stars in the sky. The smoke of a big grass fire drifted in a grey mist athwart the sweep of the plain. Now and then a crimson blaze leapt up and faded on the horizon, and the still air was heavy with the smell of burning. It was advisable to ride cautiously, for there were a good many badger-holes, and here and there the ground was seamed by a watercourse. Brittle branches occasionally snapped in the dense silence.

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"I guess I could hear myself a mile away," the trooper said. "Still, that horse of yours is making row enough for a squadron."

Gallwey did not contradict him, for, as it happened, the horse just then blundered into a little watercourse and plunged down the slope of it with a great smashing of undergrowth. Gallwey contrived to avoid a fall. With some noise they scrambled up the other side, though this time Trooper Standish made an effort to control his indignation.

"I guess you would report me if I told you what I think of you," he said.

Still, they made the coulee without mishap, and the trooper checked his horse as they rode into it. It opened up before them, a black and shadowy hollow, with little streamlets trickling through. Dim trees rolled up its sides, blurred masses against the sky above. Save the soft splash of the stream, no sound broke the stillness.

"Nobody here, anyway," he said. "We'll push on for the herder's hut. It was built when the Scotchman who had Lister's ranch put sheep on the mountain, but the timber wolves got most of them, and he let up. It's 'bout the only place in this country where there are any wolves, and the agent didn't think it worth while to mention it when he gave his lease out. I guess you don't have timber wolves in Scotland."

Gallwey said they didn't. He made no further observations, for his horse fell into the stream with a loud splash. After this they pushed on up the coulee as silently as they could, until Trooper Standish pulled his horse up.

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"We're here," he said. "That looks like the hut. We'll get down and hitch up the horses at the back of it."

Gallwey made out a shadowy mass among the birches, and swung himself out of the saddle as his comrade did. It was not what Sergeant Grier would have done, but Gallwey knew nothing of vedette duty, and Standish was very young. He had hitched his bridle round a branch when the latter turned to him.

"We may as well go in and make ourselves comfortable," he said. "If the whisky boys come down this way, it's a sure thing that we'll hear them."

They turned back towards the door of the hut, Gallwey a few paces behind the trooper, who thrust the door open. Gallwey could barely see him, for they were in the deep shadow of the trees. Just after Standish strolled in, there came the sound of a scuffle out of the darkness. Then there was a crash, a cry, and the thud of a heavy fall.

Gallwey stood fumbling with his pistol-holster, which, as it happened, was buttoned down. The button fitted tightly, and he was clumsy in his haste. As he tore at it, he heard a sound behind him, and was swinging round when a pair of sinewy arms were wound round him. He struggled furiously, reaching back with one foot for his assailant's leg, and succeeded in so far that he and the unseen man came down heavily together. The other man, however, was uppermost, and when somebody else came running up, Gallwey lay still.

"Let him up!" said the last arrival; and when he rose shakily, his assailant jerked one arm behind him.

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"Walk right into the shanty before you get hurt," he said.

Gallwey did it, since there was apparently no other course open to him. The way the man held his arm was excruciatingly painful. Somebody struck a sulphur match, and, lighting a lantern, held it up. It showed two more men, busily engaged in holding Trooper Standish, who kicked and struggled valiantly on the floor. Then the third man laid down the lantern, and, taking up a rifle, prodded the trooper with the butt of it. It was no gentle, perfunctory prodding.

"Let up and lie still before you're made. You're going to get it hard if you move again," he said, and turned to Gallwey. "Sit right down yonder."

Gallwey, who fancied that his expostulations would not be listened to, did as he was bidden. His holster was buttoned down still, and he did not think he could get it open without attracting undesirable attention. Presently one of the men unclasped the belt it was fastened to and flung it aside, while Gallwey, recognising that a conciliatory attitude was advisable, nearly laughed as he looked at Trooper Standish. The lad still lay flat upon the earthen floor, flushed in face, and hurled a stream of vitriolic compliments at his captors. One of them grinned broadly, but did not move his hands from the trooper's arms.

"Now," he said, "if one of you will pass me that pack-rope we'll tie him up."

It took two of them to accomplish it. During the operation, Trooper Standish contrived to kick one of them where it seemed to hurt. Still, they did tie him, and the lad lay still, breathless with fury,

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with wrists bound behind him, his ankles lashed together. Then the men turned to Gallwey.

"I guess your hands will be enough. Hold them out!" said one.

Gallwey did it without protesting, which, it was evident, would be of very little use. While one of the men went out of the hut, another watched him.

"Nobody's going to hurt you if you sit quite still," he said.

Gallwey sat flat on the floor, a position far from comfortable, while Standish, who now lay with his head turned from him, did not move at all. Then another man went out, leaving only one, who stood on guard with nothing in his hand. In spite of certain notions, there are, after all, very few pistols to be seen in the West, and though a good many men have rifles they keep them because game is plentiful. It was, perhaps, ten minutes later when a beat of hoofs grew louder down the coulee, until, though the door was shut, Gallwey could hear what seemed to be a line of loaded pack-animals going by. He glanced at his jailer, who smiled sardonically.

"I guess you're not quite smart enough to play this game," he said. "You're from Prospect, aren't you?"

Gallwey said he was a servant of Leland's.

"That's all right," said the man. "It's kind of lucky you aren't his partner. We have nothing in particular against you, but, when we get hold of Charley Leland, we'll fix him differently."

Gallwey did not answer him. The last horse had gone by when one of the men outside flung the door open.

"We have to get up and hustle," he said. "What are you going to do with them?"

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"I don't quite know," said his comrade. "We might lash this one up as we have the trooper, and leave them here. They couldn't chew that pack-rope through. You have got their horses?"

The other man said he had, and Gallwey broke in.

"We couldn't get very far without our horses, and you wouldn't be taking any risk by leaving us as we are," he said. "It's quite evident that I couldn't loose the trooper, and to be tied up so you can't move at all is abominably uncomfortable."

The outlaw laughed. "Well," he said, "you have some sense in you, and, as you haven't made us any trouble, I'll put a short hobble on you. Hold your feet out."

Gallwey did so, and the man busied himself for a minute or two with a piece of rope. It was evident that he was acquainted with the secure hitches used in lashing a load on the pack-saddle.

"Now," he said, "you might jerk yourself along half a mile in the hour if you were careful, though it's quite as likely you'd come down on your nose. Anyway, by the time you find the Sergeant, we'll be quite a few leagues away. That's about all, I think. Good-night to you."

He went out; and, as they heard him ride away, the trooper, wriggling round, looked up.

"Can you get out?" he said.

"Yes," said Gallwey; "I think I could, though it's rather more than probable that I shall fall over in attempting it. Under the circumstances, half a mile an hour would, I fancy, be an excellent pace."

"Still, you've got to try it," said the trooper. "Get up right away, and go for the Sergeant."

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Gallwey endeavoured to do so, managing to get out of the door before the rope jerked him off his feet. He fell over a good many times descending the coulee, stopping to rest for a minute or two on each occasion. Still he persevered, and made some progress. Dawn was in the sky when a farmer caught sight of him. He and his companions had just decided that Leland's informant had deceived him, or that the rustlers had gone another way, after all, when a weird figure moved out of the gloom beneath the bluff. They could not see it clearly, for there was only a faint grey light as yet, but it seemed to be moving in a most extraordinary fashion. "Well," said one of them, "I never saw a man walk quite like that. It is a man, anyway. There aren't any bears on the prairie."

He broke off abruptly, for the mysterious object toppled over and vanished altogether.

"It might have crawled into a hole," said another man. "No, the blamed thing's getting up again. Anyway, it's like a man. I'm going along."

They all went together. A few minutes later, they came upon Gallwey sitting in the grass. He had lost his hat, and there was a good deal of dust and grass and leaves on him. He sat still, smiling somewhat feebly.

"I don't suppose my appearance is exactly prepossessing, but that's not my fault, and I'm unusually pleased to see you, boys," he said. "As you may have surmised, the Sergeant's little plan didn't quite work out as it should have done. I'll try to tell you about it if you'll take these ropes off."

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Sergeant Grier, coming up at this juncture, made several observations that are unrecordable, but after the first outbreak, he put a check on his temper.

"They have come out ahead again," he said. "Well, it's quite likely we'll get straight with them yet, and 'bout all we can do now is to pick up their trail."

But they could find no trail, for, as little dew falls on a cloudy night, the grass was dry and dusty by sunrise. They spent most of that day riding about in twos and threes, but nobody at the scattered farms where they made inquiries had seen a single outlaw. They and their whisky had apparently vanished altogether.

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CHAPTER XXIV

LELAND MAKES SURE

The nights were growing longer, dusk was creeping up from the eastward across the leagues of whitened grass an hour earlier than it had done when they cut the hay. Leland stood outside the homestead door with a few newly opened letters in his hand. The waggon of the man who had brought them was just then lurching over the crest of the rise, and Carrie stood watching it, near her husband's side. His face was a trifle sombre, but he smiled when she glanced at him inquiringly.

"From my broker in Winnipeg," he said. "He doesn't know what to make of the market, and I can't blame him. Wheat's lower than I ever remember it, but the bears are still working their hardest to hammer prices down. In a month or so they'll have the whole wheat of the West flung into the market to make it easier for them; but they don't seem to have it quite so much their own way as I had expected. One could almost fancy that somebody was buying quietly. Anyway, there's a man willing to take most of my crop off me, when it's ready, at a little under to-day's nominal figure. You see, the Prospect hard red's first-grade for milling."

"If you sold, how would you stand?" asked Carrie.

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"Very close to ruin. The cattle run would certainly have to go, but that wouldn't count so much. It's less than half stocked now."

"Why can't you hold?"

"The trouble is that all accounts must be met at harvest, and I've got to have at least five thousand dollars to wipe out the most pressing ones. The rest might be carried over at a stiff interest. Then there are wages, harvesting and threshing. Besides, if I held the grain up, I'd be taking a big risk. It may go down another two or three cents or even more, when every man west of Winnipeg rushes his crop in, and that would turn me out upon the prairie."

"Still, you mean to hold?" Carrie looked at him steadily, with a little gleam in her eyes.

"I almost think I do."

Carrie laid her hand upon his arm. The faint flush in her cheeks was born of pride. "Well," she said, "that pleases me. It is like you, Charley. Hold it, dear, every bushel, and, before you yield an inch, let them break you if they can."

She turned abruptly and glanced at the tall wheat which rolled back, dusky green with faint opal gleams in it, across the great level and over the swell of rise into the smoky crimson that lingered in the western' sky.

"It's yours," she said proudly. "You made it grow, and do you think I don't know what it has cost you? You have gone without sleep for it, and worn yourself to skin and bone. Perhaps you have always worked hard, but, I think, never quite so cruelly hard as you have done this year."

She stopped and gazed fondly on him. Then she went on.

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"Oh," she said, "I understand—everything. Charley, dear, it isn't without a reason you are so thin and gaunt and brown, and your hands—the hands that have done so much for me—are hard and scarred. Still, I want them to hold on to what is yours. You have made the splendid wheat grow, and you won't let anybody rob you of it now."

Leland smiled, though it was evident that he was stirred.

"Well," he said, "it would be a little easier to stop them doing it if I knew where to get five thousand dollars, which is one thousand pounds. Of course, I owe a great deal more, but with that in hand to settle the odd accounts that must be met, I needn't force my wheat on the market for a month or so."

"Oh," said Carrie with a little laugh, "there will not be the least difficulty about the money. I am going to give it to you—two thousand pounds if you want it."

Leland stared at her in evident astonishment. "My dear, I never knew you had so much, and, if you have, it must be every penny that belongs to you. I couldn't let you strip yourself of everything for me."

"What have you been doing ever since I came to Prospect? Still, that doesn't matter. You must humour me. Do you think, after all you have done, I could stand by and see you ruined when there was anything that belonged to me? Charley, you must use this money. Can't you see that you must, if it's only to show that you have forgiven me?"

She turned swiftly, and threw an arm about his shoulder. "If you don't, you will almost make me hate you again. You don't want that? Then you will make no more silly objections. We are going into this fight together."

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Leland made a little gesture of surrender. "Well," he said slowly, "since you have made your mind up, I can't say no. I don't think it would be much use, anyway. But it will be a big risk, my dear."

"But," said Carrie, "that is one of the things that appeal to me. Still, it's all decided. You shall have a cheque for ten thousand dollars. That's right, isn't it? Now tell me what is in the rest of the letters."

She drew back from him a little. When Leland looked at her smilingly, a faint flush crept into her cheek again.

"Oh," she said, "I know what you are thinking. I always do. Still, you see, it isn't entirely my fault that I'm different from the girl you married. And now tell me about the other letters."

Leland handed her one of them with an illuminated device at the top of it. "It's an annual function, one of the biggest in Winnipeg, and women attend it. Everybody with a stake in the country will be there, and they want to make me a steward. My broker's on the committee, and Prospect is rather a big farm, you see. I am requested to bring Mrs. Leland along with me."

Carrie's eyes brightened. After all, it was lonely at Prospect, and she had played her part in two London seasons. Now and then she felt a longing to move among people of her own station again, and the prospect of attending the function was undeniably attractive. Her dresses would not be out of fashion yet, and, after the long months on the dusty prairie, it would be delightful to appear for once attired becomingly at a brilliant assembly. There were also eminent names upon the invitation, and she felt that, apart from any pleasure she might derive, it would be a source of satisfaction to see her husband among the notables of the land.

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"You would like to go?" he asked.

"I would like it better than anything."

Leland appeared thoughtful. "I would like to see you there. You could put on the bracelet I saw you with and the crescent in your hair."

"No," said Carrie, who looked away from him, "I think I would sooner go very plainly—that is, if I could go at all."

The trace of eagerness in her voice was not lost upon the man, and he stood silent a moment before he made a little resolute gesture.

"Well," he said, "we'll go. It's the first little pleasure of that kind I have been able to offer you, and I daresay Gallwey will see the guards ploughed just as well as I could."

"There is some reason why you shouldn't go, after all?" and Carrie glanced at him sharply. "You are too busy."

"I'm not quite sure there is. I expect it's mostly fancy, but a man gets into the way of thinking that when there's anything of consequence to be done he should see it done himself. Now those fire-guards"—and he pointed to a belt of furrows that cut off the homestead from the prairie—"are the regulation width, but I was thinking of doubling them. The grass is tinder-dry, and the oats will soon be ripe enough to burn."

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"Ah," said Carrie, "you think the rustlers might try again?"

Leland smiled drily. "Well," he said, "grass-fires are in no way unusual at this season."

Carrie guessed what he was thinking as he looked in silence out across the ripening wheat. As she gazed at the vast sweep of grain, she, too, was stirred with the pride of possession and accomplishment. She longed now for the glitter of the assembly, for conversation as one of them with men and women of culture and station, with a fervour which in all probability any one who had lived, as she had, on the lonely prairie levels would quite understand. But, with a little sigh, she crushed the longing down.

"Then," she said quietly, "we will stay here, Charley."

Leland appeared irresolute. "After all, we wouldn't be so very long away."

"No," said Carrie, firmly. "There is a lot against you, and you mustn't leave a single advantage to the enemy."

Leland stooped and kissed her. "Well, I guess you're right—still, I think I know what you're going to do without for me."

Nothing more was said, but it was not needed, for there was perfect understanding between them as they went into the house together.

It was early next morning when Leland harnessed four horses to the big gang-plough, and, as there was moonlight that night, he still sat behind another four until long after the red sun went down. There were other men he could have bidden to do the work for him, but he knew the odds against him, and meant to do it himself thoroughly. It was also careful ploughing, and not done in haste, as is most usual in the West, for throughout most of it the clods ran dead smooth and level, without a break to let the grass tussocks through. Their sides, gleaming from contact with the polished steel, were laid towards the prairie, presenting to it a serried phalanx of good, black loam; but where the sod was unusually friable, Leland got down to toil with the spade.

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A grass-fire needs very little to help it. A tuft or two of dry grass projecting from a half-turned clod will suffice, and the flame will sometimes creep in and out between and across the ridges, wherever a few withered stalks may lie. Leland knew he had not done with the rustlers yet, and it was advisable to take due precautions. The standard guard-furrows were considered quite enough by most of his neighbours, who, indeed, now and then neglected to plough them. But he had a good deal at stake, and meant, in so far as it was permitted him, to make quite sure.

He went round the wheat and oats, and then spent several days ripping odd strips here and there across the prairie in the track of the prevalent winds. It was fiercely hot weather, but he was busy every hour from dawn to dusk, and at nights his men grinned as they mentioned it. Charley Leland was getting very afraid of fire, they said. When he was satisfied with the ploughing, he had the axes and grub-hoes ground, and set the men to work cutting out the smaller growth of willows of underbrush in the strip of birches that stretched close up to the homestead from the bluff. When Gallwey, who had other duties, found him busy at it the first morning, he smiled a little.

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"I suppose it's really necessary. If not, it would be a considerable waste of time," he said.

"Well," said Leland, drily, "I almost think it is. A good deal of this stuff is tinder-dry, and you can't plough through the bluff. I don't know if you have ever seen a bad fire in the underbrush? You can't beat it out, as you can now and then when it's in the grass."

Gallwey looked thoughtful. "All this points to one thing. You feel tolerably satisfied that the rustlers will make another attempt?"

"It's a sure thing." Leland straightened himself a little, with a lean, brown hand clenched on the haft of the big axe. "Before the snow is on the ground, I or the whisky boys will have had to quit this prairie. I don't want it to be me."

Then he turned away abruptly, and, whirling the great blade high, buried it at a stroke in a dry and partly rotten birch. His comrade smiled. He had seen Leland's face, and there was something vaguely portentous in the flash of whirling steel and the crash of the blow. Charley Leland, he knew, could wait and take precautions, but it was also evident that when the time came, he could strike in a somewhat impressive fashion.

Leland worked on for several more days, and then one night Carrie and he stood outside of the door of the homestead, watching a great pile of underbrush blazing furiously. The man smiled as he turned to his companion. His hands were blackened, and his old blue-jean garments singed.

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"Well," he said, "I guess I've done what I can. I had to do it, anyway, since you lent me that two thousand pounds. If the market would only stiffen, you'd get your money back with an interest that would astonish people in England."

He broke off for a moment with a curious little laugh. "My dear," he said, "you and I should have been in Winnipeg to-night."

Carrie said nothing, but the firelight was on her face when she looked up at her husband, and once more he was satisfied.

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CHAPTER XXV

A PORTENTOUS LIGHT

It was growing dusk, of a thick, hot evening, when Leland at last pulled up his jaded horses, and, turning in the iron saddle, raised his hand in signal. Behind him, a drawn-out line of machines and plodding teams were moving on at measured distances, binder after binder, half-hidden by the tall oats that went down before them with a harsh crackle. Where they passed, men toiled hard among the flung-out sheaves, and the trampling of weary horses, rasp and tinkle of the knives, and the clash of the binders' wooden arms rang far across the great dusky plain. The sounds of strenuous activity had risen since the sun first crept up above the vast sweep of grass, and continued through the burning heat of the day; but now they ceased suddenly, and men, stripped to coarse blue shirt and trousers of dusty jean, wiped their dripping faces, and straightened their aching backs before they loosed the teams. Their hoarse voices came up to Leland, with the clatter of flung-down poles and the tramp of horses among the stubble, as he got down from his binder.

Men toil hard at harvest the world over, but, perhaps, nowhere is the work so fierce, or demands so much from those engaged in it, as on the wide levels which stretch back from the wheat lands of Western Canada into the Dakotas across the border. There flesh and blood must keep pace with unwearying machines, the latest and most ingenious that man's brain can conceive. The reaper has gone, the binder that is a year or two out of date is broken up, and, while the machine does more and more, the strength of the men who serve and drive it remains the same. For all that, none of them can afford to be left behind. They have no use for the incompetent in that country, and, though at times the pace is apt to kill, man must strain overtaxed muscle and sinew in the tense effort to keep up with wooden arms that never ache, and with clashing steel. The toilers are, for the most part, well paid and generously fed, and they give all that is in them, from pride of manhood, and in some degree from sheer necessity. The ban that is still a privilege has never been lifted yet, and, while wheat may glut the markets and flour be cheap, it is alone by the sweat of somebody's strenuous effort that man has bread to eat.

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Leland was aching all over, but that was, of course, nothing new to him, and he turned to Gallwey, who was standing close by, when a man came up to lead his team away.

"If you'll put the saddle on Coureur, Tom, and bring him out, I'd be obliged," he said. "I'll sit here and smoke a pipe before I ride out to meet Carrie and Mrs. Annersly. They should be well on their way from Custer's now."

Gallwey ventured to expostulate with him. "I believe I heard Mrs. Leland tell you not to come; and if you are going to start again at four o'clock to-morrow, one would fancy you had done about enough," he said. "I'm quite sure I have."

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"Well," said Leland, "I want a look round, anyway. There has been a good deal of smoke about most of the day, and there's a big grass-fire, or probably more than one, somewhere out on the prairie. The wind's freshening, too."

That, at least, was evident, for a rush of hot breeze came up out of the growing darkness, and during the last few hours the sun had been hidden by driving haze. Gallwey, who felt the wind upon his dusty cheek, turned and glanced down the long row of sheaves which ridged the edge of the prairie, for he guessed what his comrade was thinking. Behind the oats there rolled long, rippling waves of wheat, and, though they were dusky now, the daylight would have shown that they were tinted with bronze and gold. The tall stems were hot still, and the prairie sod was white and thick with fibrous dust.

"Everything is about as safe as you could make it," he said. "We have good guards, and you ploughed check-furrows outside of them."

"I did," said Leland, drily. "I cut them across the track of the usual winds. This one's an exception, and I have seen a fire jump guards that were 'most as wide. There would be trouble if a spark got in among the stubble, and I'm taking no chances just now."

Gallwey made a little gesture of concurrence as he once more glanced down the long rows of sheaves. The stubble stood among them knee-high and above the strip of ploughing that cut it off from the prairie, for straw has no great value in that country.

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"Well," he said, "I daresay you are right. It's a little hard to see how a fire could get in, but, after all, one can never make quite sure of anything."

He went away, and when he came back with the horse, Leland, swinging himself stiffly into the saddle, rode out across the rise into the silent prairie. Half an hour had passed before he met the waggon, but he then turned back with it, checking his lively horse as Carrie's team, which had travelled a considerable distance that day, plodded slowly through tussocky grass up a slope. There are places where the prairie runs dead level from horizon to horizon, but here and there it lifts in long, gentle rises, as the ocean does when the swell of a past gale disturbs its oily surface. Often the change is imperceptible until one comes to the dip where the incline softly falls away again. As they crossed the ridge, Carrie pulled the horses up and gazed about her.

"It's a trifle impressive. No sky, and darkness on the unseen earth. There are only the fires moving in a void," she said.

The others did not answer, though they were in sympathy with her. Thick darkness hid the prairie, and they on the crest of the ridge seemed utterly alone in an immeasurable immensity of space. Somewhere in the midst of it were long smears of crimson light that seized the eye with their suggestion of distance as they flung themselves aloft when the waggon crossed a rise. Still, the rise remained invisible, and, as Carrie had said, the fires seemed to be moving through a great emptiness. It was curiously and almost hauntingly impressive.

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"I suppose they can't be near Prospect?" she said.

Leland turned his face to the wind, which was filled with the smell of burning. "The nearest should be most of a league away from the homestead," he said. "It's fortunate it is. That fire's an unusually big one."

There was silence again for a minute or two, while they watched the moving radiance, and then Carrie stood up suddenly.

"Prospect should be straight in front of us over the horses' heads," she said.

"Almost. You couldn't see it. The rise hides the house."

"Ah!" said Carrie, with a little gasp. "Then there's another light behind it. Something low and little that twinkles like a star."

Leland shook his bridle and touched the horse with his heel. "Take your own time," he said hoarsely. "I'm going on. I'm afraid you'll have light enough before you're home."

In another moment he had vanished into the darkness, and they heard a drumming of hoofs grow fainter as he rode towards Prospect at a furious gallop. For a while there was nothing he could see, but when he swept across the last rise, and the lights of Prospect twinkled close in front of him, he made out a little patch of radiance beyond them on the prairie. It was evident to him that nobody at the homestead, which stood lower, would see it. Then he struck the horse again, and was riding by the stables at a wild gallop when a voice hailed him.

"That you, Mr. Leland?" it said.

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Leland, remembering what instructions he had given the watcher, shouted and pulled up his horse with a struggle.

"Turn out the boys!" he said. "Get them along to the south side of the oats with the wet grain bags and shovels. Tom Gallwey's in the house?"

The unseen man said he was; and in another minute Leland, who rode on, swung himself down at the homestead door. Gallwey, who had apparently heard him coming, ran out.

"Bring me my old Marlin, and get yours," said Leland. "There's a fire-bug getting his work in to windward of us on the prairie."

Gallwey disappeared, but came back with two rifles in less than a minute. Leland, who had let the horse go, turned to him.

"We're going on foot to get that fellow if we can," he said. "I guess the boys will know what to do."

Gallwey considered that this was probable, for grass-fires are common at that season, and Leland had more than once explained exactly what the part of each would be in case one approached the homestead. He and his comrade accordingly set off through the bluff at a steady run, though Gallwey twice fell over an unseen obstacle, while, when they came out, there were two moving lines of fire, small as yet, but growing, on the prairie behind it. It was also evident that the hot wind would bring them down upon the oats. Leland, however, did not head for either blaze, but for a point some distance to the left of the one farthest off.

"That man means to make quite sure," he said. "He'll figure he's as safe as he was when he started the first fire, since we've shown no sign of seeing it."

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"I suppose there is a man," gasped Gallwey.

Leland seemed to laugh, though he was running hard. "Well," he said breathlessly, "it's quite a usual thing for one fire to come along in weather like this, but it's rather too much of a coincidence when two of them start in the same place, while, when you see a third one too, it's enough to make one anxious for a good grip of the man who's lighting them."

"I can't see a third."

Leland swung his arm up, and appeared to be pointing in front of him. "You're going to. Go on slow, but be ready to run when you see a twinkle. The one thing to remember is that you have a rifle."

He turned off and vanished, while Gallwey pulled up to a walk. There was a very big fire a league or so away, and two small ones behind him which were extending rapidly, but all the rest of the prairie was wrapped in utter darkness. When he turned, after glancing at the wide blaze of radiance, he could not see a yard in front of him. Where his comrade was he did not know, but he fancied his object was to place the incendiary between the two of them when he betrayed himself by the third blaze. Gallwey was, however, not quite sure there would be a third blaze, while it appeared not improbable that if the man still lingered, he might hear them.

For five minutes he walked straight on, or, at least, he fancied so. It seemed to be getting darker, for the air was thick with drifting smoke, and there was no moon. Then a pale twinkle leapt up in front of him, and that was all he could be certain of, for, since there was no horizon, it might have been, for all that he could tell, either above him or beneath. It was a feeble blink of light that presently went out again. Still, he had his direction now, and his heart beat a good deal faster than usual as he went on at a run, until the pale blaze sprang up a second time. Then he dropped swiftly, and crouched with one foot under him and the rifle in his left hand, watching the radiance increase. He could see the taller tussocks of grass between him and the fire now, and drew in his breath, pitching the rifle forward with his elbow on his knee, when a black figure became faintly visible behind it.

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He could not see the sights, but the man who shoots duck on the slogs, handles the rifle in that country much as one uses a double-barrel, and Gallwey felt that the chances were in favour of his driving a forty-four bullet into the black figure by the fire. Still, something in him recoiled from doing so without, at least, a warning, and he raised his voice.

"Stand still!" he said; "I have you covered." It is possible that the man did not believe him, and made a swift calculation of the chances against him. In any case, he vanished incontinently, and it was a moment or two too late when Gallwey's rifle flashed. He felt the jar of the butt on his shoulder, but, as usual, heard no report. He was listening for the whine of the bullet and the thud which would tell him whether it had reached its mark. He did not hear that either, and, slamming down the slide, fired again at a venture. Then he heard a drumming of hoofs, and rose to his feet. It would be Leland's turn now, and he fancied his comrade would, at least, have endeavoured to place the man between himself and the fire. It was certain that there was nothing to be gained by running after a man upon a horse.

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While he stood still, he saw a little pale flash, and heard the ringing of a rifle. The flash appeared again, and this time was followed by a cry and a heavy crash. Gallwey ran as fast as he could in the direction whence it seemed to come, and in another few minutes stopped beside a big, shapeless object that was moving convulsively on the grass. He made out his comrade stooping over it.

"Get hold!" said Leland. "The horse is done for, but he has the man pinned down under him."

Then it became apparent that another object, which had a certain human semblance, lay among the horse's legs, and a faint voice rose from it.

"Hump yourselves, before he rolls over and smashes me all up," it said.

Gallwey was not sure what his comrade did, but he laid hold of what seemed to be the man's arm, and, as the horse rolled a little, succeeded in dragging him clear of it. He let him go and stood looking down on him stupidly.

"Leg's broke!" gasped the man. "The beast fell on me."

"Well," said Leland, drily, "it will save us some trouble. You're not going to walk very far like that, and, when we get the fire under control, we'll see what can be done for you. It's your own fault that you'll have to wait a little."

Then he swung round to Gallwey. "Back to the guard-furrows for your life."

Gallwey fancied that he had never run quite so hard before, but, when he reached the strip of ploughing between stubble and prairie, Leland was already there, shouting breathlessly to the men spread out along it. Not far away a wavy wall of fire was moving down on them out of the prairie, and there were two more some distance to the left, though it would evidently be a little while before the last of them rolled up. Already a thick and acrid vapour whirled among the oats, and, when it melted a little, and a brighter blaze sprang up, he could see the men's tense faces and the curious rigidity of their attitudes.

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Then there was a trampling of hoofs, and, turning, he saw Carrie Leland pull her plunging team up in the midst of the smoke. She stood up on the front of the waggon, and a flickering blaze of radiance showed that she was dripping with water. A pile of wet bags lay behind her.

"Throw them out, boys," she said. "There are more of them waiting."

In another moment Leland ran up and seized the near horse's head, as the beast kicked and plunged in the stinging smoke.

"Go home, and leave the team to one of the boys," he said.

Carrie laughed, standing bolt upright, the fire-light on her face, the reins in her hands.

"No," she said; "they're wanted, and do you think we can't drive in England? Get the bags out as fast as you can, boys."

The warning seemed necessary, for one of the horses' forelegs left the ground, and the other's hind hoofs crashed against the front of the waggon. Then Leland was almost swung off his feet, and Carrie laughed again.

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"Let them go. I'll hold them if you're quick," she said.

She dropped into the driving-seat with her feet braced against the board, and the men made what haste they could, while the frantic team kicked and plunged and backed the waggon in among them. Gallwey was stirred to admiration as he watched the tense, shapely figure, braced against the strain upon the reins, that was now and then forced up by the fire and lost again.

Then a thick wreath of blinding smoke whirled down on them, and Carrie cried out as she swung the whip. There was a thud of hoofs and a rattle, the men leapt aside, and the waggon plunged into the vapour, as Gallwey said afterwards, like a thunderbolt.

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CHAPTER XXVI

FIGHTING FIRE

There was silence for a minute, the tense silence that precedes a struggle, when the waggon lurched away, and the men stood still, intent and at a strain, blinking at the fire. The wind had lulled, and the smoke went almost straight up, shining luminously in the red glare. Beneath it, a wavy line of flame rolled on across the prairie, licking up the parched grass as it came. As it happened, the grass thereabouts was higher than usual. Unless there is a gale behind it, a grass-fire does not move with much celerity, and that night the one that menaced Leland's crop seemed inordinately slow to those who watched it. Indeed, one or two of them found it strangely hard to stand still while it rolled down on them, which, in cases of the kind, is by no means an unusual thing. Action of any kind, even purposeless action, is a relief to men under strain.

There was, however, in the meanwhile, nothing that they could do, and they commenced to growl inarticulately as they glanced at one another with fierce, set faces. Here and there one of them twisted the end of the wet bag he held, to give him a firmer grip, or fidgeted aimlessly with his shovel. The rest frowned and coughed, for which there was some excuse, or stood woodenly still, according to their temperament. Leland, however, swung round towards the row of binders that stood half buried among the oats. [Pg 293]

"That's one thing we overlooked, and they have got to take their chances now," he said. "We couldn't get a team to face the smoke, and nobody could harness them if we did. If they're burned, we're going to have trouble to get the harvest in."

Gallwey, who stood near him, made a sign of agreement. Every binder in the country was in use just then, for, since machines are remodelled yearly, implement dealers stock no more than they expect to sell, and let on hire any by chance left upon their hands. It was accordingly evident that, if these were burned, his comrade could not replace them, and, in face of the wages usually paid, nobody could garner the harvests of the Northwest without the binder, which not only cuts the grain, but ties it into sheaves. It is by saving costly labour alone that the prairie farmer pours his wheat into the markets of the East, and retains a small margin for himself, in spite of fifteen hundred miles railway haulage, and three thousand by sea. It is the gang-plough and the automatic binder that have opened up the prairie.

"You couldn't get another anywhere in time to be of use," he said.

Leland, however, now laughed harshly. "Well," he said, "after all, I needn't worry about them. It's no great comfort, but I'm not likely to want them if they're burnt. In that case, there'll be no crop to harvest."

It seemed to Gallwey that this was probable enough. The oats stood half as high again as most of those he had seen in England, on thick, flinty stems that had dried and yellowed under a scorching sun, while behind them rolled the wheat that was almost as ripe. There had been no rain for days, and very little dew, and now, when a fierce, hot wind was driving down the fire on them, the whole crop seemed ready for the burning. The guard-furrows would check the flame, but they could not stop the sparks, and sheaves and tall stubble lay spread like tinder for them to fall among. [Pg 294]

Then once more the wind descended, and a long wreath of smoke, blotting out everything, drove on. A great shower of sparks blew forward out of the midst of it, and, when it was rent aside, there sprang up a great crackling blaze. It leapt forward with a roar, and then broke up, running low among the grass, while the smoke whirled past the men, choking and blinding them, thicker than ever.

"Stand by!" cried Leland. "There's the first! Beat it out! Hold on! Don't crowd in on them!"

His voice was lost in the crackle of the fire, and that was the last intelligible thing he said for some time. A further hail of sparks came out of the smoke, and a blaze sprang up among the stubble. It spread, even while two men fell upon it with wet grain bags, but flickered out when a third reinforced them with a shovel. Then it grew intolerably hot, and the action became general.

The fire was almost up to the guard-furrows, and a rain of burning particles blew on before it. Incipient blazes broke out where they fell, and men fought them savagely in the blinding smoke. Now and then they fell over each other, and one here and there was struck by his comrade's shovel, but nobody heeded that. Epithets that at other times would have been answered by the clenched fist passed unnoticed; and choking, gasping, whirling bag or shovel, they fought on. Now and then the smoke thinned a little, and the fierce red light beat upon their dripping faces and bowed figures, only to fade into a confused opacity again that made but faintly visible the forms flitting like phantoms amidst the vapour. Here and there a man cried out, but nobody heard what he said, and his feeble voice was drowned in the crackle of the flame. Leland appeared to be wherever the fire was fiercest, once knocking Gallwey down as he came floundering through the stubble towards a spreading blaze. [Pg 295]

Then the fire rolled up to the edge of the ploughing, a wall of flame, perhaps a hundred yards from end to end, leaping up with a mad roaring; then it stopped and fell away. The sparks dropped short, too, in a lulling of the wind, and what, by contrast, seemed black darkness rushed down upon that part of the prairie. Then there was an impressive silence, and men, half dazed by the heat and effort, wiped their streaming faces, and looked round in search of their invisible neighbours.

None of them knew how long this lasted, but, though they had won so far, the fight was not yet over. Presently the smoke that streamed past them was torn aside again, and a red light shone

along the line. The second fire was coming on, and there was still another behind. The flickering radiance showed the dusky figures that leant upon the shovel-hafts or shook out the half-dried bags. Here and there it also showed a blackened face, surmounted by frizzled hair.

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Gallwey, as it happened, found himself close to Leland, and looked at the latter with a little sardonic smile, not knowing that he himself was not much more prepossessing in his outward appearance. Leland's wide hat hung shapelessly over his blackened face. There was a charred gap in the front brim, as well as several big holes in his jean jacket, which was badly rent. Blood was trickling from one of his hands.

"I don't know if I did that myself, or if somebody hit me with a shovel," he said. "Anyway, when I fell down, one or two of them ran over me."

Then he turned fiercely towards the moving fires. "The next one's bigger. If the wind would only drop!"

Gallwey, who fancied by the way the smoke drove past them that there was very little chance of it, coughed. "It's evidently not going to. If we had only a little water, one could be more content. I feel as if there was not a drop of moisture anywhere in me."

One or two of the others heard him, and cries went up.

"Water!" said somebody. "Is there any?"

"I'm 'most as dry as this bag. It will blaze next time," said another man. "My jacket's singed to tinder, too. How're we going to do when our clothes start burning?"

Leland stood up where the rest could dimly see him on the spoke of a binder wheel.

"You should have thought of that before, boys," he said. "Anyway, you'll have to hold out until the thing's over. It's too far to the homestead, and nobody could bring up a team."

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Just then a man further back along the line flung out a pointing hand.

"Well," he said, "I guess that looks as if somebody was trying."

The sound of a trampling in the stubble rose through the crackle of the fire, and a half-frantic team and a waggon materialised out of the vapour. A slim, dimly-seen figure swayed with the jolting upon the driving-seat, and, when the watchers saw another apparently clinging to the load behind, a confused shouting broke out.

"Wet bags and water. Get hold of the beasts, some of you. It's Mrs. Leland. She's a daisy!"

There was a rush of shadowy figures towards the waggon, and every man was wanted, for the team would not stand still. Blackened hands clutched at rein, head-stall, harness, whatever they could get a finger on, and the terror-stricken animals, borne down by sheer weight, could not make off with nearly a dozen men hanging on to them. The rest swarmed about the waggon, where Carrie still sat with the light of the fire on her, while Jake, the cripple, hurled down dripping bags, and strove to wriggle out a water barrel. They got it down between them, and Carrie made a sign to Leland, who was struggling amidst the press.

"That will do!" he said. "Stand clear, boys. Carrie, don't come back."

Then there was a sudden scattering of the crowd, a clatter and a trampling of stubble, and once more waggon and team were lost in the darkness and driving smoke. After that, men surged about the barrel, striving to dip their hats in it. It was a little while before they were satisfied, and then one of them waved his dripping hat as though to enforce attention.

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"Boys," he said, "I guess it's not every woman would have got that team here, and it's not Mrs. Leland's fault there's only water in the barrel. You can blame that on your legislature. Anyway, you were glad to get it, and I never struck a farm where they fixed the hired man better than Leland of Prospect and his wife do. That's why, now the other fire's coming along, it's up to every man to see them through."

There were some laughter and shouts of approval, and the shadowy figures trooped away to meet the second fire. It was fiercer than the first, but, though some burned their clothing and odd patches of their limbs, they overcame first it and then the smaller one that came behind it. Then Leland, who called Gallwey and two of the men, strode away through the darkness to where he had left the outlaw. They found the horse without much difficulty, and it was dead; but there was no longer any sign of the man. When they shouted, it happened—very much as they had expected—that nobody answered them.

"I guess the whisky boys must have played the 'possum on you," said one of the men.

Gallwey laughed a little as he turned to his comrade. "Well," he said reflectively in his cleanest English, "considering everything, it's almost a pity one of us didn't think it worth while to examine his leg. You see, he couldn't very well have walked off if it had really been broken."

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Leland, who had perhaps some excuse for being consumed with vindictive fury, swung round on him.

"How far could you walk with a broken leg?" he said. "Do you think I have no sense at all?"

Once more Gallwey appeared to reflect. "One would scarcely fancy you had shown your usual perspicacity to-night. Of course, I'm not saying anything about myself."

Though it was very dark, Leland appeared to glare at him for a moment or two, and then broke out into a little laugh.

"Tom," he said, "you do it very well—so well that once or twice I've found it hard to keep my hands off you before I saw the point of it. You only want an eye-glass to make the thing perfect. Well, I can wait until my turn comes, and you have helped me shake the black fit off."

Gallwey said nothing further as they went back together towards the house, but he was content. He was well acquainted with his comrade's temperament, and knew that his silent, simmering anger was not wholesome for himself, or calculated to make things pleasant for anybody else. Still, a very little thing would usually serve to dissipate it. They overtook the rest on the way to the homestead, and, when they approached the door, which it was necessary for the men to pass, saw that it was open. Carrie, who appeared just outside it, beckoned Leland to her, and then turned to the rest, standing close beside him.

She was now attired in a long dress, almost but not quite an evening gown, that became her well; but Leland was blackened all over, and there were many singed holes in his clothes, wet and smeared with ashes, and part of the wide brim of his hat was missing. The men seemed to notice the contrast between the pair, and there was a little good-humoured laughter. Carrie Leland smiled at them in turn, though she would have borne herself very differently to these rough men a few months ago. [Pg 300]

"Are there any of you burnt, boys," she asked.

Several of them admitted that they were, though they said it was nothing to count, and were directed to repair to the kitchen, where Mrs. Nesbit had oil and flour ready. Then Carrie made a little gesture, as though to invite attention.

"Boys," she said. "I can't thank you for what you have done to-night. You see, there are things one really can't thank people for properly, but I think Charley and I would have been ruined if you hadn't been the kind of men you are. Still, it's been a long while since the six o'clock supper, and I expect, if I'd been with you, I should be hungry, too. Of course, in one way, there's nothing quite good enough for you, but we have been busy while you were putting out the fire; so, if you'll go along to the dinner-shed, you'll find Jake and Mrs. Nesbit have done what they can. There is another thing. Nobody need get up until he likes to-morrow. Not a team will leave the stables until after dinner."

Leland turned and looked at her in bewildered astonishment, for nothing had ever delayed work at Prospect at harvest, or, indeed, at any other time, before; and probably because the men understood what he was feeling, there was a great roar of laughter when his wife turned and laid her hand upon his shoulder. [Pg 301]

"It is all right, Charley. I mean it," she said.

The rest stood still a minute, gazing at her, not awkwardly, for self-consciousness is rarely a characteristic of the plainsman, but as if they felt that there was something to be said or done. Perhaps her beauty appealed to them, and it is also possible that the offer of a feast had its effect, but her gracious simplicity went considerably further. No one would have more quickly resented condescension than these hard-handed men, who thought themselves, with some reason, the equal of any in the world; but they could recognise the distinction between that and sympathy, and were willing to yield her everything she did not claim. Yet they were a trifle puzzled, for this was not the attitude the cold and silent woman who had come to Prospect had once adopted towards them. Then there was a murmuring among them, until one stood forward with his hat in his hand.

"Madam," he said in excellent accent, "the boys desire me to reply for them, and I must first admit that the thought of a supper appeals to them and me. Perhaps it would be admissible to say that, having had the honour of dismissal from a good many farms between Dakota and Prince Albert, I know a little about prairie rations and cookery, and I would like to testify that, in respect to both, Prospect stands alone. One might also venture to observe, without making any invidious reflections upon Mrs. Nesbit and the somewhat unvarying Jake, that the menu has become even more attractive lately, for which there is no doubt a sufficient reason." [Pg 302]

There was further laughter, and Carrie, who saw the little twinkle in her husband's eyes, felt the blood creep into her cheeks; but the man went on.

"So much for the supper, and it has its interest. Man is usually hungry, especially when he has to work hard enough to satisfy Charley Leland, but I would like Mrs. Leland to understand that we wish her to consider us her devoted servants. Anybody can hire a man. You can buy his labour for so many hours a day, but there must always be a good deal left outside that kind of bargain, and it's all that's left outside we would, on an occasion like this, like to offer Mrs. Leland. In fact, it would not be a great matter to put a fire out every night if it would please her. If you sympathise with these few remarks, will you signify your approbation, boys?"

There was a clamorous shout, and as the men trooped away, Jake's voice rose up.

"Get a big grin on over my cooking, would you?" he said. "It's salt-pork bones and bad beans

you're going to get if I can fix it, you hungry hogs!"

Leland laughed, but Carrie felt that his eyes were on her when they went in, and, glancing at him covertly, she saw the little gleam of pride in them.

"They're yours," he said, and she knew he meant the men. "Whatever you want done, you have only to ask them; but it wasn't because of the supper."

The blood crept into Carrie Leland's cheek. "Everybody is very kind to me," she said.

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CHAPTER XXVII

LELAND FEELS THE STRAIN

Supper had not long been cleared away on an evening some three weeks after the fire, and the sunlight still streamed into the big general room; but Leland lay somewhat limply in a lounge-chair, which, considering that there was a good deal of the wheat still to be cut, was a somewhat astonishing thing for him to do. His face was paler than usual; indeed, here and there a trace of greyness had crept into the bronze, and his eyes were heavy. But a mass of papers lay on the little table in front of him, and it was evident that he had just been writing. His mail, which had come in two or three hours earlier, had been an unusually large one. Carrie sat not far away, watching him a trifle anxiously. She had been more than a little startled when he came in for supper walking unsteadily.

"You are still looking far from well," she said.

Leland laughed, though his eyes were half closed. "Oh," he said, "I'll be round again to-morrow all right. It was as hot as I ever remember it this afternoon, and each time I came down the long stretch with the binder the sun was on the back of my neck. I just want to sit still a little and cool off."

Carrie shook her head. "You have been working too hard," she said. "Can't you take it a little easier? It surely isn't necessary for you to drive a binder."

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"Just now, anyway, I almost think it is. When I'm there the boys can't do less than I do, and I set the pace for every man in the field. There are, you see, quite a few of them, and the little extra effort each one makes counts for a good deal. Besides, I have always worked, and now it would be quite hard to get used to walking round with nothing in my hands, even if I wanted to. Anyway, it won't go on for more than another month or so."

He made a little involuntary gesture of weariness. "I don't think I'll be sorry. It has been getting a little hard lately, and if the market doesn't break me we'll go away when the wheat is in. You would like to go to Montreal or New York for a week or two? We would do all the concerts and theatres."

Carrie felt that she would like it very much indeed, for, after all, life at Prospect had its disadvantages; but she had reasons for not displaying too much eagerness. Finances were straitened, and Leland, in spite of his simple tastes, was apt to be extravagant where she was concerned.

"Of course!" she said. "I mean, if circumstances permitted it, but that depends upon the market, doesn't it? What has it been doing lately?"

Leland took up a circular. "Standing still for a week, and that is rather a curious thing. You see, with the first wheat pouring in, the bears quite often get their own way just now and hammer prices down, but quotations seem to have been quite steady in Chicago the last few days. They've had a bad season in Minnesota, and the hail wiped out a good deal of wheat in Dakota. What one or two States can grow doesn't count in itself so much against the world's supply, but it's now and then enough to upset a delicate balance. In Winnipeg the bears made another raid, but they couldn't break the price, and I'm inclined to fancy that all they offered was quietly taken up. The outside men, who like a little deal now and then, aren't all of them babes in the wood."

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"I'm afraid I could never quite understand these things," said Carrie.

"In one way it's simple. The world wants so much wheat, though the quantity varies, because there are places where they eat other things when it gets too dear. Now, you can get statistics showing how many million bushels they have raised here and there, and it's evident that, if it's less than usual, it's going to be dearer. On the other hand, if there's more than the world has apparently any use of, the men it belongs to have some trouble in selling it, and values come down. That's the principle, but there are men who make their living by shoving prices up and down, and they're able to do it sometimes against all reason. Now and then they half starve poor folks in Europe, and now and then they ruin farmers in the Western States and this part of Canada. They have millions of dollars behind them, and they're clever at crooked games. Still, it sometimes happens that Nature turns against them, and drowns them in floods of wheat; or,

when they're squeezing the life-blood out of the farmers, it strikes men up and down the country that wheat was so cheap it ought to be dearer. Then, if the bears slacken their grip a little, men who like to gamble and have the money to spare, send their buying orders in, and the bears find it hard to get the wheat they have pledged themselves to deliver. That sends prices up and up."

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"You think that is likely to happen?"

Leland looked very thoughtful. "I can't say. Nobody could. There's one significant thing. Prices are steady, though the wheat is coming in. You'll get considerably more than your two thousand pounds back if they go up. We could have a month in New York then, and you'd go to operas with that crescent glittering in your hair."

Carrie said nothing, for though she had not quite understood all he said, it was sufficiently clear that if prices went down she would never put the crescent on again. She had further reasons, too, for not desiring to discuss that subject. While she sat silent, Gallwey came in, and Leland, taking up a paper, handed it to him.

"That," he said, "is a little idea of mine, and, if we'd had any sense, we would have thought of it earlier. With the new country opening up to the North, the police bosses at Regina have their hands full. They don't want to be worried, and Sergeant Grier seems kind of afraid to admit he can't put the whisky boys down, or to pitch his reports too strong."

Gallwey nodded. "The same thing," he said, "has occurred to me all along. His attitude is comprehensible, and I have a certain sympathy with the folks at the head of the police. To attend to everything, they would want a brigade."

"Well," said Leland, drily, "I have no intention of getting my homestead burnt because it suits anybody's hand, and you'll start round to-morrow and get this petition signed by every responsible man. It's a plain statement of what we have been putting up with, and a delicate hint that there are folks among the Government's opposition who might find the information interesting in case the police bosses do nothing. I almost fancy that ought to put a move on them."

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Gallwey smiled a little as he read the document, which, however, was worded with a tactfulness he had scarcely expected from his comrade. Leland's proceedings were, as a rule, rather summary and vigorous than characterised by any particular delicacy.

"I shall be away three or four days, at least," he said.

"Won't that be a little awkward? You are not very well just now."

Leland made a little impatient gesture. "I'll be all right again to-morrow."

His comrade did not contradict him, though he had some doubt upon the subject, and, sitting down, talked about other matters for several minutes, while, when he rose, he contrived to make Carrie understand it was desirable that she should find an excuse for going out soon after him. She did so, and came upon him waiting in the kitchen.

"He persists that there is nothing the matter with him, but I am a little anxious," she said. "You don't think he is looking well?"

Gallwey appeared thoughtful. "I scarcely fancy it is serious, but there is no doubt he has been worrying himself lately and doing a good deal too much. In fact, the strain is telling. Still, I dare say a little rest would do wonders. Couldn't you keep him in to-morrow?"

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"Keep him in!" said Carrie, with a little expostulatory smile.

There was a twinkle in Gallwey's eyes. "It will probably be difficult, but I almost think, in your case, not absolutely impossible."

"Well, I will do what I can. It is rather a pity you have to go away."

The smile grew a trifle plainer in Gallwey's eyes. "As a matter of fact, and, although I am quite aware that there will probably be trouble about it, I am not going. One of the boys will have to ride round with the paper, instead of me. Still, you will have to decide how you can keep your husband in."

He went away and left her to grapple with the question, which, since Leland was a self-willed man, was a somewhat difficult one. It was some little while before there occurred to her a rather primitive device which appeared likely to prove effective. She had, however, not quite realised the inherent obstinacy of her husband's temperament.

It accordingly happened that, when the crippled Jake was busy cleaning up the big general room early next morning, he was astonished to see Leland, attired in airy pyjamas, appear in the doorway. He raised his hand as though in warning, and glanced towards the other door. It occurred to Jake that he did not look well.

"Mrs. Nesbit's not around?" Leland asked.

Jake said she was in the cook-shed just then, and Leland sat down somewhat limply in the nearest chair.

"Slip up into Tom Gallwey's room, and bring me a suit of his clothes, the new ones he goes to the

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settlement in," he said. "That will square the deal, because I can't help thinking he had a hand in the thing."

"Where's your own?" asked Jake in evident bewilderment.

"That," said Leland, drily, "is just what is worrying me. But you do what I tell you quick before Mrs. Nesbit comes in."

Jake did as he was bidden, for there was a look in Leland's eyes which warned him that further questions would not be advisable; and, when he came back with the clothing, the latter dressed himself hastily, and, slipping out, made his way to the stable. He had some difficulty in putting the harness on the team, and was considerably longer over it than usual; but he managed to lead them out, and had reached the binder with them about the time Carrie and Eveline Annersly entered the room he had quitted. The first thing they saw was a suit of pyjamas lying on the floor, and the elder lady laughed as she turned to Carrie.

"I fancied you would find it a little difficult to keep Charley Leland in against his will," she said.

Carrie, who did not answer her, summoned Jake.

"Where is Mr. Leland?" she asked.

"I guess he's working in the wheat," said the man, with a grin.

Carrie appeared astonished, and Eveline Annersly laughed again. "Charley is a trifle determined, but there are, I almost fancy, lengths to which he would not go. He has probably borrowed someone's clothing."

"Did he leave any message?" asked Carrie, turning to the man.

"No," said Jake, reflectively. "I don't think he did. He wasn't coming back for his breakfast. I was to take it out to him, and he figured Tom Gallwey's store-clothes wouldn't look quite so new by sundown."

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He went away, and Eveline Annersly smiled at her companion. "You'll simply have to put up with it," she said. "It really doesn't sound as if he was very ill."

In the meanwhile, Leland, after stopping some twenty minutes for breakfast, climbed into the binder's saddle and drove through the wheat until almost noon. He did not seem to see quite so well as usual, and his head ached almost intolerably. Gallwey's jacket also hampered him, until, tearing it off, he let it fall. It was afterwards found, ripped in several places by the knife and tied up in a sheaf. The day was fiercely hot, and the dust rose thick from crackling stubble and trampled soil, but Leland drove on, swaying now and then in his saddle, the perspiration dripping from him.

It was close upon the dinner hour, and the sun was almost overhead in a cloudless sky, when he approached a turning. The glare from the yellow wheat was dazzling, and the ironwork on the binder almost too hot to touch with the hand, and Leland once more found his sight grow blurred as he strove to turn his team. They did not seem to answer the guidance of the reins, and when the machine, turning short, ran in among the wheat, he raised himself a little as he called to them. That was the last thing he remembered.

The next instant, the man behind him saw him reel and topple from the saddle as the whirling arms came round. He pulled his team up, and, jumping down, ran as for his life; but, most fortunately, Leland's tired horses had stopped of their own accord in a pace or two, for, when the other man came up, their driver lay partly across the knife-sheath with his feet among the wheat. What could be seen of his face was darkly flushed, while the sleeve and breast of his dusty shirt were smeared with trickling red. The other man, startled as he was, had, however, sense enough to seize the near horse's head before he shouted to his comrades.

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"Lay hold of the wheel, two of you," he said when several of them came running up. "Now get up, somebody, and pull the driving-clutch out. We don't want to saw him open."

He had kept himself in hand, but he gasped with relief when the deadly steel was thrown out of action. Then, still holding the horses, he directed the rest to drag Leland clear. It was a minute later when he pushed the others aside and bent over him. Leland lay limp and still in the dusty stubble, with eyes half closed, and a red trickle dripping into the thirsty soil beneath him. The man, who had seen a good many bad axe-wounds in the Ontario bush, rolled back the breast and sleeve of the torn shirt before he straightened himself and wiped his dripping face.

"I guess he has come off quite fortunate, in one way. There's no big vessel cut, or it would spout," he said. "The first thing to do is to get him out of the sun, and it's not very far to the house."

They picked him up, and four of them carried him to the homestead as gently as they could. At the door they met Carrie. She closed one hand hard, and turned very white when the men, who stopped, stood gasping a little and looking at her stupidly, with their burden hanging limply between them. Then, while she struggled with a numbing sense of horror, the leader awkwardly took off his hat.

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"I guess it's nothing very bad. He's cut in two places, and the binder hit him on the head, but a man of his kind will soon get over that," he said. "Now, I know quite a little about cuts and things, and, if you'll send for Mrs. Nesbit, we'll soon fix him up. Get a move on, boys. Mrs. Leland will

show you where to take him."

The words had a bracing effect. Carrie shook off her first terror, and, though she was trembling, went up the stairway in front of them. She was almost afraid to look round at the men, who stumbled noisily with their burden. Still, she felt a little easier when, in the course of half an hour, the Ontario man managed to stop most of the bleeding with a few simple compresses, and to get Leland, who had not opened his eyes yet, into bed. He turned to Carrie, who was standing close by with a tense, white face.

"I guess all he got after he fell off the binder is not going to worry him much, but I don't know what he had before," he said. "It might have been sunstroke, and it might just as well have been something else. He was kind of shaky all the morning. Anyway, I'll tell Tom Gallwey, and he'll send some one of the boys in to the railroad to wire for a doctor."

He went out, and Carrie was left in the darkened room kneeling by her husband's side, while Tom Gallwey drove the fastest team at Prospect furiously across the prairie. He did not send another man, but went himself, and the horses he drove had reason to remember that journey.

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CHAPTER XXVIII

CARRIE'S RESPONSIBILITY

Carrie Leland spent two very anxious days before a doctor, from one of the larger settlements down the line, arrived in company with Gallwey, who drove him in from the station. The latter had, during the journey, favoured Gallwey with his professional opinions as to the cause of Leland's illness. As soon as he reached the homestead he was shown into the sick-room. Leland, who had recovered consciousness after the first few hours, submitted to a lengthy examination with a patience which somewhat astonished his comrade, after which the doctor, who asked him a few questions, nodded as though satisfied.

"I have no great fault to find with anything the man did who attended to you in the first place," he said. "In fact, I have seen considerably worse dressings. A bushman, I presume?"

Leland looked at him languidly out of half-closed eyes. "He's not going to be sorry. It would be more to the purpose if you told me what was the matter with me."

"An abrasion on your forehead, and a bruise on the back of your head which should apparently have been sufficient to produce concussion of the brain," the doctor said. "Then your arm is cut half across, and, if the knife hadn't brought up on a bone, you would probably not have survived the wound on your breast. I almost think that is quite enough."

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"Anyway, it's not quite what I mean. The cuts will heal. What made me turn dizzy and fall off the binder? I've never had anything of that kind happen to me before."

The doctor smiled drily. "Well," he said, "in similar circumstances you will in all probability have it happen again. It rests with yourself to decide whether you like it. Speaking generally, it's the result of worry and trying to work a good deal harder than it's fit for you to work. To be a little more definite, you have had what one might call incipient sunstroke on the top of it, and, though I don't know how you fell on the binder, the thump you got had its effect upon your brain. That's almost as near as one can get to it in every-day language."

Leland laughed. "The question is, when can I get up?"

"It depends upon yourself. If you lie quite still and don't worry about anything, I will consider the matter, when I come back again."

Leland could extract nothing more definite from him, and, when he went out, Carrie took him into her sitting-room.

"There is nothing to be anxious about," he said. "The surgical aspect of the case is in no way serious, and I'll leave you an antiseptic dressing and mail you some medicine. I don't know when I can get back, but it will be a week, anyway; so, if there is any change that seems to make it advisable, you will wire me from the depôt. What your husband needs is absolute quiet. He is on no account to be worried about any business."

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"I think I can promise that," said Carrie. "Still there are his letters. If I don't give him any, it will certainly make him restless, and, as most of them are about the price of wheat and accounts, I'm afraid they would scarcely be likely to soothe him."

The doctor appeared a trifle uncertain, and flashed a swift glance at Eveline Annersly, who sat not far away. Like most of his profession, he was acquainted with the little shortcomings of human nature, and was quite aware that there are men whose wives would probably be none the happier if supplied with an insight into all their husband's affairs. He was too young to conceal very successfully what he was thinking, and, though he was, perhaps, not altogether conscious of it, he looked to Eveline Annersly for guidance. She said nothing, but there was, he fancied,

comprehension and an answer in her little smile.

"Well," he said, "I might suggest that you open them and keep back anything that seems likely to disturb him."

In a few more minutes, Mrs. Nesbit came in to announce that a meal was awaiting him. When he went out, Eveline Annersly smiled again as she glanced at her companion.

"That man is painfully young," she said. "I suppose you are not afraid of opening Charley's letters?"

"No," said Carrie with a little flash in her eyes. "Why should I be?"

"Well," said Eveline Annersly, reflectively, "one would almost fancy that when Jimmy marries, he would sooner his wife did not see everything that came for him. It was a letter that first made the trouble between Captain and Ada Heaton. In such cases, it not infrequently is." [Pg 316]

Carrie turned upon her with a red spot in her cheek. "You will succeed in making me angry presently. You know there is nothing Charley would keep from me."

"That, I think, is saying a good deal; but, while you are no doubt right, my dear, any one who had only seen you in England would be inclined to wonder what had happened to you lately. If I had suggested anything of the kind once upon a time, you would only have looked at me with chilling disdain, but now a word against Charley Leland brings a flash into your eyes. That, however, is by the way. I wonder if you have heard that Heaton has at last taken proceedings?"

"I haven't. I never hear from home."

"I have had a letter and a paper. The decision was in his favour. There was practically no defence. There couldn't very well have been in face of the disclosures, and, while I had a certain sympathy with Ada at first, I have none now."

Carrie sat silent a minute, a faint flush in her face. Then she suddenly raised her head.

"Aunt," she said, "I suppose you don't know it was about Ada that Charley and I quarrelled? In fact, it was on her account I nearly drove him away from me altogether. In that, too, it seems that I was wrong. I wonder sometimes how he ever forgave me, or why I have so much I never deserved to have at all."

She said nothing further, and went out presently. That afternoon and for several subsequent days, she opened Leland's letters, finding nothing that must be kept back from him. But one evening, however, she sent for Gallwey when he came in from harvesting, and, signing him to sit down, handed him a letter from the Winnipeg broker. [Pg 317]

"Will you tell me what you think I ought to do?" she said. "You will see that the man must have an answer."

Gallwey studied the letter carefully for several minutes. When he laid it down, he felt a certain sympathy with Mrs. Leland, though he fancied she would show herself equal to the occasion.

"It's rather unfortunate it should have come just now," she said. "Still, it is here, and I want your views."

Gallwey looked thoughtful. "The thing is rather a big one. As I daresay you know, there are different kinds of wheat, but our hard red is rather a favourite with millers. There is, it seems, a man who, subject to one or two conditions about samples being up to usual grade, is willing to buy about half the crop from Charley at a cent the bushel more than he previously offered. I wonder if you quite grasp the significance of that."

"Prices are rising?"

"Not necessarily, though they are certainly steadier. This man may have orders for some special flour for which our grade of red is preferable, though he could, of course, get other wheat which would, no doubt, do almost as well. Still, prices have, at least, stiffened. It is what is called a rally, and it may last a week or so, though it is somewhat strange it should happen now, when everybody has wheat to sell." [Pg 318]

He stopped a moment. "If you sell this wheat, and prices fall, you will have made an excellent bargain, though the figure doesn't cover expenses. On the contrary, if prices go up, you will have thrown a good deal of money away. You have to bear in mind that it represents about half the crop, which makes it evident that a good deal depends upon a right decision."

"Have you any idea what prices will do?"

Gallwey made a little gesture. "To be frank, I haven't, and I should shrink from mentioning it if I had. There are thousands of people up and down this country trying in vain to reason it out, and I have no doubt that some of the keenest men in the business find the same difficulty. I daren't advise you."

Carrie sat silent for at least a minute, and then looked at him gravely.

"If I sell, we shall not cover expenses; if I hold, we may be ruined altogether or it might pour hundreds of dollars into Charley's bank?"

"Yes," said Gallwey. "That is it exactly."

Again there was silence, and then Carrie looked up with a little sparkle in her eyes. "Charley's not so well to-day, and this would certainly make him ill again. It seems I must not shrink from the responsibility. When he does not know exactly what to do, it is the boldest course that appeals to him. Write the man in Winnipeg that I will not sell a bushel."

Gallwey rose and made her a little inclination. "It shall be done," he said. "I wonder if one might venture to compliment you on your courage?"

Now the thing was decided, Carrie Leland sat still, somewhat limp, and pale in face again.

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After that, some ten days passed uneventfully until the doctor came back. He did not appear particularly pleased with Leland's condition, and repeated his instructions about keeping him quiet and undisturbed. He left Carrie anxious, for she could not persuade herself that her husband was looking any better. He was, however, rapidly becoming short in temper, and, soon after the doctor had gone, she had another struggle with him. Entering the room quietly, she found he had raised himself on the pillows and was looking about him.

"If you would tell me where my clothes are, I'd be much obliged," he said. "That man's no good at his business. I'm going to get up."

He made an effort to rise then and there. With some difficulty, Carrie induced him to lie down again. He listened to what she had to say with evident impatience, and then shook his head.

"I'm to keep quiet, and not worry. There's no sense in the thing," he said. "How can I help chafing and fuming when I have to lie here, while everything goes wrong, and nobody will tell me what is being done? I felt a little dizzy just now, or you wouldn't have got me back again, but I'm going to make another attempt to-morrow. You have to remember that when I get up I get better. I've never been tied up like this before, and the only thing that's wrong with me is that I've had a doctor."

Carrie contrived to quiet him, though she did not find it easy. When at last he had gone to sleep she went out, meeting Gallwey in the hall. He glanced at her with a little sympathetic smile.

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"I came upon the doctor riding away," he said. "It appears that Charley has been telling him frankly what he thought of him. I suppose he has been trying to get up again?"

Carrie said he had, and Gallwey appeared to consider.

"Well," he said, "it might, perhaps, help to keep him quiet if you let him know that the appeal to the police authorities has been considered favourably. I met Sergeant Grier, and he told me that they have sent him half a dozen more troopers. He seems tolerably confident that he can lay hands on the rustlers' leaders, though he was in too much haste to tell me how it was to be done. By the way, I'm afraid you will have to get Charley to write a cheque in a day or two. We'll have to pay the Ontario harvesters shortly."

He left her relieved, at least, to hear that Grier saw some prospect of putting the outlaws down, but another couple of weeks had passed before she heard anything more of him or them. In the meanwhile, the Sergeant, as he had indeed expected, met with a good many difficulties. He was supplied with plentiful information concerning the outlaws, but the trouble was that he could not always decide how much of it was meant to be misleading until he had acted upon it. After a week's hard riding, during which his men had very little sleep, he found himself one night with six of them rather more than sixty miles west of Prospect. He had that day surrounded what he had been told was one of the whisky boys' coverts in a big bluff, and "drawn a blank," a thing that had happened once or twice already. The horses were dead weary, the men worn-out, so he decided to camp where he was in a thick growth of willows. A cooking fire was lighted, and when the men had eaten, all but two, who were left to watch the horses, lay down, rolled in their blankets.

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It was about an hour before the dawn when Trooper Standish paced up and down on the outskirts of the bluff. He had been in the saddle under a hot sun most of twelve hours the previous day, and now felt more than a little shivery as well as weary. A little breeze came sighing out of the great waste of plain, and the chill of it struck through his thin, damp clothing, in which he had ridden and slept. Trooper Standish was also more than a little drowsy, though he would not have admitted it. In fact, few men are capable of very much, either in the shape of effort or watchfulness, at three o'clock in the morning.

A hundred yards or so behind him, a comrade was standing near the tethered horses, though he might have been very much further away for all Standish could see of him. A thin fringe of willows lay between Standish and the prairie. When he turned a little, he could see the faint glow of the fire, which had not quite gone out, where the bushes were thicker. Though there was a breeze, it had no great strength, and the willows rustled beneath it fitfully with a faint and eery sighing. As it happened, this was a little louder than usual, when Trooper Standish stopped to listen and consider. His duty in such cases was, of course, quite clear, but now that the willows had stopped rustling, there was no sound, and he was aware that the young trooper who rouses his worn-out comrades without due cause, after a hard day's ride, has usually reason to regret it. Besides this, he remembered that he had not played a very brilliant part in another affair, and he still tingled under the recollection of the others' jibes. Accordingly, he prowled cautiously through the bluff, and then sauntered back towards his comrade.

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"I guess you have heard nothing suspicious?" he said.

"No," said the man. "I didn't expect to, anyway."

"You didn't hear me call out, either?"

"I didn't. If you'd made any noise, I would have heard you. Have any of the whisky boys been crawling in on you?"

Trooper Standish gazed hard at the man, who had evidently asked the question ironically. He certainly seemed wide awake, and it occurred to Standish that he might have been half asleep himself, and had only fancied that he called out. He accordingly decided that it might be just as well if he said nothing further about the matter, and he strode away on his round again.

The sun was creeping up above the prairie when one of his comrades, rising to waken the Sergeant, saw a strip of folded paper, of the kind used by the storekeepers for packing, fixed between the branches of a willow close by. Grier took it down, and his face grew intent when he saw that there was a message scribbled across one part of it.

"If you want to do Leland a good turn, get up and ride," it said. "The boys are holding Prospect up to-night."

Then Grier turned to the astonished troopers. "It may be a bluff to put us off the trail," he said. "Leland keeps good watch at Prospect, and has it full of harvesters."

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"Well," said one of the others, "I don't quite know. Last time I met one of his teamsters he told me they'd have no use for most of the harvesters in a day or two. He said something, too, about the boys going out to the railroad to haul the new thresher in. I guess that would keep them away three or four days altogether."

Grier looked thoughtful. "Oh, yes," he said. "I've heard that mill's an extra big one, and they were most of a day getting the old one across the ravine. It's quite certain, too, that Leland has a good many friends up and down the country who now and then break prairie or cut hay for him, and, as some of them stand in with the rustlers, too, it's easy to figure why the man who sent us this warning didn't want to show himself. Well, I guess we'll take our chances of being wanted, though the horses are dead played out, and I don't know where to get another within thirty miles. Nobody who can help it is going to let us have a horse at harvest time."

Then he turned sharply. "Who was on horse-guard with Ainger?"

"Standish," said one of the men.

Grier smiled unpleasantly. "Send him along. Then get your fire lighted and look after your horses. We'll start for Prospect when you've had breakfast, but I guess some of you are going to walk a few leagues to-day."

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CHAPTER XXIX

LELAND STRIKES BACK

It was about ten o'clock at night, and Carrie was sitting with Eveline Annersly in the big general room at Prospect. Leland, who had been brought downstairs to be further away from the hot roof, lay asleep in another room that opened off the corridor leading to the kitchen. Almost every man attached to the homestead was away. The threshers were expected on the morrow, for throughout that country the wheat is threshed where it stands in the sheaves, and it had always been a difficult matter to convey the mill and engine across the ravine. The thresher now expected was an unusually large one, and Gallwey had set out with most of the teams to assist the men in charge of it. He had, however, promised to come back with some of the boys that night.

Carrie was a little sleepy, for she had borne her part in the stress of work usual in a Western homestead at harvest time; but she had no thought of retiring until Gallwey arrived. Nothing had been heard of the outlaws since the fire, but since most of the harvesters would require to be paid and sent home in a day or two, there was a good deal of money for the purpose in the house. It seemed that Eveline Annersly was also thinking of it, for presently she looked at her companion with a little smile.

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"It is on the whole fortunate my nerves are reasonably good," she said. "It would be singularly inconvenient if Charley's whisky-smuggling friends should visit us to-night. Your bills could, one would fancy, be got rid of more easily than English notes, and I understand there are a good many of them in Charley's room."

Carrie laughed, for she was unwilling to admit she had any apprehensions. She felt that, if she did so, they might become oppressive.

"There are," she said. "A visit to the settlement means two days lost, and Gallwey and I decided to get enough to pay the threshers, too, so as to save another journey. I had expected him back by now."

She rose, and, going out, opened the homestead door. It was a quiet, star-lit night, with no moon in the sky, and the prairie rolled away before her dim and shadowy. Not a sound rose from it. Even the wind was still. As she gazed out across the dusky waste, something in its vastness and silence impressed her as never before. She had grown to love the prairie, but there were times when its desolation reacted almost unpleasantly on her. The homestead, with its barns and stables standing back beneath the stars, seemed so little, an insignificant speck on that great sweep of plain. She roused herself to listen, but no beat of hoofs crept out of the soft darkness, and it was evident that Gallwey was a long way off yet.

Then she turned with a little shiver, and went back into the house. Crossing the big room, she went down the corridor, and softly opened the door of the room where her husband slept. A lamp was burning dimly, and it showed his quiet face, now a trifle haggard and lined with care. Carrie's eyes grew gentle as she looked at him, for he had been very restless and apparently not so well that day, while it was evident to her that his vigour was coming back to him very slowly. Then, as she turned, her eyes rested on the safe, and again a thrill of apprehension ran through her. She was glad that Gallwey had the key.

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She went back to the general room, and, though she had not noticed it so much before, found the stillness oppressive. There was not a sound, and, when her companion turned over a paper, the rustle of it startled her.

"I almost wish I had not let Tom Gallwey go," she said. "Still, it was necessary. The threshers couldn't have got their machine here without the boys."

Eveline Annersly looked up. "I certainly wish he had come back, though I suppose he can't be very long now. He told you ten o'clock, I think. In the meanwhile you might find this account of the wedding at Scaleby Garth interesting."

Carrie held out her hand for the paper, but her attention wandered from the description of the scene in the little English church. She had left the outer door open, and found herself listening for a reassuring beat of hoofs; but nothing disturbed the deep silence of the prairie. Half an hour had passed when she straightened herself suddenly in her chair, with her heart beating fast, and saw that Eveline Annersly's face was intent as she gazed towards the door.

"Oh!" she said. "You heard it, too?"

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"Yes," said the elder lady, with a tremor in her voice. "It sounded like a step."

In another moment there was no doubt about it, and Carrie rose with a little catching of her breath as a shadowy figure appeared in the hall. For a moment she stood as though turned to stone, and then suddenly roused herself to action as a man came into the room.

He stopped just inside the threshold, a big, dusty man, with a damp, bronzed face; but, as it happened, it was Eveline Annersly his eyes first rested on. He glanced at her suspiciously, and then swung round as he heard a rattle, just in time to see Carrie snatch down her husband's rifle.

She stood very straight, breathless, and a trifle white in face, but there was something suggestive in the way the rifle lay in her left hand. The man could see that a swift jerk would bring the butt in to her shoulder and the barrel in line with him, while the girl's gaze was also disconcertingly fixed and steady. She had stood now and then just outside the woods at Barrock-holme, with a little 16-bore in her hands, getting her share of the pheasants as they came over. The intruder could shoot well enough himself to realise that when the barrel went up her finger would be clenched upon the trigger. His hand was at his belt, but he kept it there, and for a second or two the pair looked at one another. Then he quietly turned round, which argued courage, and called to somebody outside.

"Come in, boys," he said. "Here's a thing we hadn't quite figured on."

Carrie turned when he did, and in another moment she was standing with her back to the door that led to the corridor, while Eveline Annersly, who gasped, looked at her with horror in her eyes.

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"What are you going to do?" she said.

Carrie did not look in her direction. She was watching the outer door, and stood tense and still, but with something in her pose that suggested a readiness for swift, decisive movement. In fact, her attitude vaguely reminded her companion of a bent bow, or a snake half coiled to strike. Her face was set, and there was a portentous glint in her very steady eyes. Her voice was harsh, but impressively quiet.

"If they try to get into Charley's room I am going to kill one of them," she said.

Then two other men came in, and one of them made a little half-whimsical gesture.

"Hadn't you better be reasonable, Mrs. Leland?" he said. "We're not going to hurt you."

"What do you want?" asked the girl.

"Money," said the man who had come in first. "Anyway, that's the first thing. You have plenty of it here. Tom Gallwey brought a big wallet out from the settlement a week ago. They're in the safe in the room behind you, too."

Carrie, nervous and overwrought as she was, decided to temporise. Gallwey could not be long, and he had promised to bring some of the boys home with him.

"Well," she said, in a strained voice, "I haven't the key."

One of the men laughed. "That's not going to worry us. If we can't open it with a stick of giant-powder, we'll take the safe along. It's hardly likely to be a big one."

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"Then it's only the money you want?"

Carrie's perceptions had never been keener than they were that night, and she saw one of the others glance at his comrade warningly. She also saw the little vindictive gleam in another man's eyes, and she understood. It was not alone to empty Leland's safe they had come, and he lay sick and helpless in the room where it stood. One other thing was also clear to her, and it was that none of them should go in there at any cost.

"Well," said the outlaw, "if we got the money without unpleasantness, it would help to make things pleasanter for everybody, and we're going to get it, anyway. The only two men about this homestead are held up in the stable, and there are quite a few of us here. I guess you had better let us in to the safe."

Carrie moved a trifle, bringing her left arm, which was aching, further forward. "I think there are two keys belonging to the safe," she said. "I wonder if I could remember where the other one is."

She delayed them at least a minute while she appeared to consider, and then the men evidently lost their patience, for one of them turned angrily to their leader.

"We have no use for so much talking, and want to get ahead," he said. "It's a sure thing they wouldn't leave the place empty any length of time with Leland sick, and I guess you're going to have Gallwey and the boys down on you if you stay here long."

One of his comrades growled approvingly. "Oh," he said, "quit talking. If she hasn't got that key on her, she doesn't know where it is. We'll run in and get hold of her. It's even chances she has nothing in the gun."

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It was evident that the suggestion commended itself to all of them, but the trouble was that nobody seemed anxious to put it into execution. Carrie pressed down the magazine slide with one hand. It would, however, only move a very little, and she realised that the magazine was almost full. Then she laughed harshly, and the sound jarred on Eveline Annersly's ears.

"Well," she said, "why don't you come?"

Then she started, and endeavoured to put a further restraint upon herself, for it seemed to her that a very faint drumming sound rose from the prairie. None of the others, however, appeared to hear it. In another moment an inspiration seemed to dawn on one of the men.

"Put the lamp out, and we'll get her easy in the dark," he said.

Eveline Annersly failed to check a little startled cry, but Carrie turned towards the leader of the outlaws very quietly.

"Stop a moment," she said. "You daren't hurt a woman. It would raise all the prairie against you; but, if one of you comes near that lamp, I will certainly shoot him."

The leader made a little gesture, half of admiration and half of anger.

"Now," he said, "we've had 'bout enough talking, and your husband spoiled our game when he brought those troopers in. We know who sent for them. Well, we're lighting out for good after we've cleaned his safe out, and done one or two other little things. We don't want to hurt you, but we're not going to be held up by a woman. It's your last chance. Do you mean to be reasonable?"

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Carrie was white to the lips, for it was perfectly plain that they intended to have a reckoning, before they went, with the man who had driven them out.

"Keep back from the light!" she said.

Then the outlaw made a little half-impatient gesture of resignation. "Well," he said, "you'll have to get hold of her, boys."

They came forward, but, though that would have been wiser, they did not run. Two of them moved crouchingly, and Carrie could not see the third man. Still, they had only made a pace or two when one of them suddenly straightened himself.

"Look out!" he said; "we're going to have trouble now."

Carrie could not see the door behind her open, but Eveline Annersly saw it, and gasped. Then she laughed, a little hoarse laugh that at any other time would have jarred on those who heard it, as Leland appeared in the opening. He was in pyjamas, and his face was white and haggard. One arm, still bound up, hung at his side, but a big pistol glinted in his other hand. One of the outlaws

recoiled, but his comrade sprang towards the lamp. Mrs. Annersly saw Carrie's rifle pitched forward, there was a double detonation, two jarring reports so close together that one could scarcely distinguish between them, and the man nearest the light reeled and struck the table before he sank into a huddled heap on the floor. A streak of blue smoke hovered in the middle of the room, and another filmy cloud floated about the inner door, through which Leland presently lurched, gaunt and pale and grim, with a look in his eyes that Eveline Annersly remembered afterwards with horror. He said nothing whatever, but his pistol blazed, and the room resounded with the quick, whip-like reports. Then there was thick darkness as the light went out. So far as Eveline Annersly, who was the only one who remembered anything, could make out, two of the outlaws retreated towards the door, shouting for their comrades; but they did not reach it, for a voice rang sharply outside.

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"Hold up!" it said; "we've got you this time sure."

What took place outside did not appear at once, but a few minutes later somebody came in, calling out for Mrs. Leland, and struck a match. It went out, but another man soon appeared, holding up a lamp, the light of which showed Leland leaning upon the table with an arm round his wife, who was laughing hysterically.

"I didn't hit him, I didn't! You fired first!" she said.

"That's all right," said Leland, soothingly. "Anyway, there's a good deal of life in him yet. I'm quite sure I plugged another of them just before the light went out."

Carrie turned half round, glancing towards the man, who was struggling to raise himself from the floor, and then once more clung to Leland with a little cry.

Then Trooper Standish set down the lamp, and Sergeant Grier came forward, while several hot and dusty troopers stood revealed about the door.

"Is there anybody hurt except this man?" he asked.

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Leland said there was nobody so far as he knew, and the Sergeant nodded.

"Then I guess you and Mrs. Leland had better light out of this, while we see what can be done for him and another man the boys have outside. I'll come along and tell you about it later."

Leland began to expostulate. "I've been tied up by the leg long enough, and there are one or two things I want to do right now."

The Sergeant, who ignored him, turned to Carrie with a little dry smile.

"Get him back to his bed, Mrs. Leland, as quick as you can, and send your friend away," he said. "You're going to have no more trouble, but this is no place for you."

Carrie seemed to rouse herself, and with some difficulty led her protesting husband away. Half an hour had passed when the Sergeant and Gallwey, who had arrived in the meanwhile, were admitted to Leland's room. He now lay, partly dressed, in a big chair, for nothing that Carrie could do would induce him to go back to bed again. Grier sat down with a little smile, and Carrie looked at him warningly.

"You are not to excite him," she said.

"Excite me!" said Leland. "It's the one thing that has cured me. I'll be going round with the threshers in a day or two."

"Well," said the Sergeant, "it's quite a simple tale. One of your friends, perhaps a boy who'd worked for you, gave us the office at sun-up, and we started as soon as we heard what the rustlers meant to do. It seems, from what one or two of them have admitted, that they knew the game was up when the new troopers came, and meant to get even with you before lighting out."

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"How did they know the boys were away, and what in the name of thunder did Gallwey keep them all this while at the ravine for?" Leland broke in.

Grier raised his hand. "You keep still. I'm telling this thing my own way. How the whisky boys found out more than that is one of the points I'm going to inquire into. Well, we started, and before we were half-way most of the horses were dead played out; and though I went round by a ranch, the boys were out driving cattle, and had only two horses in the stable. I guess we led the horses most of the rest of the way, until, when we were a league off, I rode on with one of the boys. Then, coming in quietly, we saw there was something wrong. While we waited for the boys, we fixed things so that we got our hands on four of the gang. Two of them are the bosses, and one of them wants a doctor, as well as the other man with the bullet in his leg. That's about all there is to it. You're not going to have any more trouble with the rustlers."

"Will the man Charley shot get well?" asked Carrie, with tense anxiety.

The Sergeant smiled. "Oh, yes," he said. "He'll be on his way to Regina jail in a day or two."

He went out with Gallwey by-and-bye, and Carrie sat down by her husband, with a little happy laugh.

"Oh," she said, "that's one trouble done with; and, if you won't excite yourself, Charley, I'll tell you something more. Wheat is going up."

HARVEST

There was no longer any fierceness in the sunshine, and the day was cloudless and pleasantly cool when Carrie Leland and Eveline Annersly strolled through the harvest field at the middle of afternoon. The aspect of things had changed since the morning Leland had fallen from his binder, for, though there was a little breeze, the wheat no longer rolled before it in rippling waves. It stood piled in long rows of sheaves that gleamed with bronze and gold in a great sweep of ochre-tinted stubble, beyond which the prairie stretched back, dusty white, to the cold blueness of the northern horizon.

The sheaves were, however, melting fast, for waggons piled high with them moved towards a big machine that showed up dimly against a cloud of smoke and dust in the foreground. A long spout rose high above it, pouring down a golden cascade of straw upon a shapeless mound, and a swarm of half-seen figures toiled amidst the dust. The threshers are usually paid by the bushel in that country, and since they have, as they would say, no use for anything but the latest and most powerful engine and mill, it was only by fierce, persistent effort the men of Prospect kept the big machine fed. Its smoke trail drifted far down the prairie, and through the deep hum it made there rose the thud of hoofs and the sounds of human activity, which, it seemed to Carrie Leland as she stood in the bright sunshine under the cloudless sky, had a glad, exultant note in them. It stirred her curiously with its vague suggestion of faith that had proved warranted. Once more there had been a fulfilment of the promise made when the waters dried, and, in spite of drought and scourging hail, the harvest had not failed.

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"Ah," she said, "it is easy to be an optimist to-day. It is the looking forward when everything appears against one that is difficult; but, when I remember the springtime, I feel I shall never have any reason to be proud of myself again."

Eveline Annersly's eyes twinkled. "I'm not sure the time you mentioned could have been particularly pleasant to Charley, either."

"Still," said Carrie, with a little sigh, "he held fast to his optimism and worked, while I let the gloom of it overmaster me."

"And now, as the result of it, that machine is threshing out I don't know how many thousand bushels of splendid wheat."

Carrie's eyes grew gentle, and there was a little thrill in her voice. "We have both of us ever so much more than the wheat to be thankful for," she said.

Then she changed the subject abruptly. "Aunt, if you want to catch the New York mail, you will have to answer that letter to-night. You know that neither of us wants you to go."

"Would you like to go back to England?"

Carrie looked at the wheat and great sweep of prairie with glowing eyes. "I think I should be content wherever my husband went. There was a time when I fancied that if we had several good harvests and he sold Prospect, it would be nice to go back with him to the old country, but now I do not know. I seem to have grown since I came out here, and the prairie has, as he would say, got hold of me. It is so big and strenuous, there is so much in this country that is worth doing, and I think Charley is like it in many ways. No, I scarcely fancy he would ever be quite happy in England. But, after all, that is not the question. We want you. Do you feel you must go back again?"

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Her companion smiled a little. "I am not altogether sure that I do, but one has to consider a good many things. The house Florence writes about at Cransly is pretty and convenient, and, by sharing expenses, we could live there comfortably enough. Still, you know the life two elderly ladies would lead at Cransly, and after Barrock-holme—and Prospect—there are ways in which it would not appeal to me very strongly."

"Oh, I know," and Carrie laughed. "You would be expected to set everybody a model of propriety, and to rule with the vicar's wife such society as there is in the place. You would have to know the exact shade of graciousness to bestow upon the wife of the local doctor, and how to check the presumptuous advances of the retired tradesman or the daughters of the stranger who settled within your borders. Isn't it all a little small and petty?"

She turned once more to the prairie with a gesture of pride. "Ah," she said, "out here it's only what is essential that comes first. We open our gates to the stranger and give him our best, even when he comes on foot in dusty jean. It's manhood that counts for everything, and Charley and the others are always opening the gates a little wider. We take all who come, the poor and the outcast, and ask no questions. One has only to look round and see what the prairie has made of them. Aunt, I think the greatest thing in human nature is the faith of the optimist. No, I shall stay here, and you will stay with me."

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"I think a little would naturally depend upon what Charley wants."

Carrie laughed. "Well," she said, "we will ascertain his views. He is not as a rule very diffident about expressing them."

Tom Gallwey, somewhat lightly dressed, drove up just then in a waggon piled with grain bags.

"Where is Charley?" she asked.

Gallwey smiled. "Lifting four-bushel wheat sacks into a waggon. He has been doing it most of the afternoon, too, and I almost think it would be wise if you looked after him."

He drove on, and Carrie attempted to frown. "Isn't he exasperating?" she said. "The doctor told him he was to take it very easy for at least another month, and he promised me he would do nothing hard."

They went on towards the thresher, walking delicately among the flinty stubble, until they reached the edge of the whirling dust. Overhead the straw was rushing down through a haze of smoke. Below, half-naked men toiled savagely about the big machine. Steam was roaring from the engine, for the threshers were firing recklessly, and the thudding clank of the engine and hum of the clattering mill were almost deafening. There was a constant passing upwards of golden sheaves, a constant downward stream of straw, and the dusty air seemed filled with toiling men and kicking teams.

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Then Carrie went forward into the midst of the press, for it was naturally where the activity was fiercest that she expected to find her husband. He was with another harvester pitching up big sacks into a waggon. As a bushel of wheat weighs approximately sixty pounds, it was an occupation that demanded much from the man engaged in it. She touched him on the shoulder, looking at him reproachfully when he swung round and let the bag drop.

"Charley," she said, "you remember your promise?"

The twinkle crept into Leland's eyes. "Oh, yes," he said, "I told you I'd do nothing hard. When you know the trick of it, this thing's quite easy."

It did not appear so to Carrie. "Come away at once," she said. "You are to do no more this afternoon."

Leland made a little whimsical gesture of resignation, but it is possible that he was not altogether sorry; for, though he had recovered rapidly since the affair with the whisky boys, his full strength had not come back, and he had been lifting grain bags for several hours. In any event, he put on his jacket, and, brushing a little of the dust off his person, went away with her. They sat down together with Eveline Annersly, beneath one of the straw-pile granaries that stood in a row amidst the stubble.

"Aunt Eveline is thinking of going away," said Carrie.

Leland started, and there was no doubt that his concern was genuine. "Oh," he said, "the thing's quite out of the question. She told me she was going to stay with us as long as we wanted her."

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"I did," said Eveline Annersly. "Still, I really think you can do without me now."

Both Carrie and her husband knew exactly what she meant, but it was the latter who had the courage to admit it.

"Madam—" he began.

Eveline Annersly checked him with a smile. "The title has gone out of fashion, with a few other old-fashioned things you still seem to cling to in the newest West. I do not like it—from you."

Leland made her a bow that included Carrie. "Well," he said, "Aunt Eveline—and that, because of the humanity in it, is, perhaps, a finer title—I'm talking now, and you are going to listen to me. You were kind to me at Barrock-holme, where I was what you call an outsider, and you gave me the greatest thing I ever had, or that ever could come to me. You didn't find it easy. Things were far from promising when you were half-way through, but you stood by me, and now do you think there is anything that would be too much for me to do for you?"

There was a little silence. It was the first time the fact that all three recognised had been put into words, and a faint flush mantled Eveline Annersly's cheeks. Still, her eyes were gentle, and there was no doubt that the bond between the little faded lady, upon whom the stamp of station was plain, and the gaunt prairie farmer, with the hard hands and the bronzed face, sprinkled with the dust of toil, was a wondrous strong one. In England it would, perhaps, have seemed incomprehensible, an anachronism; but amidst the long rows of sheaves he had called up out of the prairie there was nothing strange in their communion. After all, it is manhood that counts in the new Northwest.

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"Well," she said, quietly, "it was a great responsibility, and there were times when I was horribly afraid. Still, events have proved me right, and I think it is the greatest compliment I could pay you when I say that it was to make Carrie safe I did it."

Carrie said nothing, but there was faith and confidence in her eyes when she turned them for a moment upon her husband as he spoke again.

"And now you talk of going away," he said. "Aunt Eveline, we want you here always, both of us. You stood by us through the struggle, for it has been a hard one this year, and now I want you to share in the result of it. Oh, I know, in some ways it's a hard country for a woman brought up like you, but things will be different at Prospect with wheat going up, and there's one great argument

you can't get over—what Carrie Leland is content with is sufficient for any woman on this earth."

They had just decided that she was to stay, when Sergeant Grier rode up. He swung himself out of the saddle, and tossed Leland a bundle of papers.

"I got one or two at the settlement, and Custer asked me to hand you the rest," he said. "I guess you'll be glad to see that wheat is jumping up. It seems as if everybody was buying. Still, that wasn't what I came to talk about."

"You don't want me at the trial of the rustlers' friends?" asked Leland, impatiently.

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Grier laughed. "I guess we'll fix them without you. It's quite easy to find out things, now the gangs are broken up. I heard from Regina the other day, and the man who got the bullet in his leg is already doing something useful—making roads, I think. The other fellow is going out with the work gang as soon as he's strong enough."

"But if they let them out, won't they run away?" asked Carrie.

"I guess not," said the Sergeant, drily. "They hitch a nice little weight to their ankles when it appears advisable, and a warder with a shot-gun keeps his eye on them." Then he turned to Leland. "I want a few particulars about that last fire you had."

"You'll get them after supper. In the meanwhile there's something Tom Gallwey wants to talk to you about. Hadn't you better put up your horse?"

Sergeant Grier appeared willing to do so, for the fare at Prospect was proverbially good. Presently he moved off to the stables. Carrie then remembered that she had several matters to attend to. The commissariat required supervision when there were threshers about. She, however, made Leland promise that he would do nothing further, and left him with Eveline Annersly. He turned to the latter with an apologetic smile as he took up one or two of the papers the Sergeant had brought.

"I'm rather interested in the markets. You don't mind?" he said.

Eveline Annersly said she didn't, and watched him with pleasure as he glanced at the papers in turn, for it was evident that the news was reassuring.

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"They've got the bears this time—screwed up tight," he said. "Two of the big men gone under—couldn't get the wheat to cover, and it looks to me as if there is a bull movement everywhere. I can't remember prices ever stiffening this way before when the wheat was pouring in, and, if the bulls can swing the thing over harvest, there's no saying what they may go to."

"I'm glad you're satisfied," said Eveline Annersly. "Still, your observations are not very clear to me."

Leland looked at her with a smile. "The fact is that it seems quite likely I'm going to be comparatively rich. I'm 'most where I stood this time last year already, and if the market doesn't break away under the harvest, prices are going up and up. One thing's certain—Carrie's going to have a month in New York."

He stopped a moment and looked at his companion steadily. "It's rather a curious thing that, when I suggested she might like a run over to Barrock-holme, she didn't seem to want to go. And there's another point that's puzzling me. When I mention the crescent or the pearls, why does she want to change the subject?"

Eveline Annersly decided to tell him. "The two things go together. It happens now and then that a woman has to choose between her relations and her husband. Carrie chose you. Those jewels are, you know, worth a good deal of money, and, while they belong to her, there is reason for believing that, unless she had shown herself resolute, Jimmy would have had them instead. In fact, I have a notion that her father found it distressingly inconvenient to send them. One can raise money on such things in England."

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A deeper hue crept into Leland's sun-darkened face. "I understand now—that is, some of it," he said. "It would be better if you made the whole thing clear."

"Well, there was a time when you were rather hard pressed for a thousand pounds. Carrie, if I remember, found you a much larger sum. But she evidently did not tell you where her jewels went."

The man's eyes glowed. When at last he spoke, there was a thrill in his voice.

"It hurts me, in a way, to think of it—but what does that matter?" he said. "Her jewels, everything she had . . . when I was in a tight place, she brought them all to me. . . . It was the two thousand pounds that saved me. . . . Shall I have time enough to get even with her in all my life, Aunt Eveline?"

Eveline Annersly smiled reassuringly. "One ought to do a good many little things in a lifetime, and, after all, it is deeds of gratitude that please us most."

They went in some little time afterwards. While they sat at supper together, one of Leland's distant neighbours came in.

"I've ridden straight from the settlement. Macartney had a wire from Winnipeg just before I left,"

he said. "Wheat jumped up another cent to-day."

Leland looked across the table at Gallwey. "Tom," he said, "before I fell sick, my broker sent along an offer for about half the crop. I wouldn't sell. But I have wondered once or twice if the other man made another bid."

"He did," said Gallwey, with a quiet smile. "There were, as you may remember, two or three weeks when we told you very little, and you wouldn't have understood anything during the first of them. At the time everybody round here was anxious to sell—that is, except Mrs. Leland. By her instructions, I wrote your broker that you meant to hold on to every bushel." [Pg 345]

Leland said nothing, for there were others present, but Carrie felt her face grow hot when he looked at her. It was also significant that soon after the meal was over the others seemed to feel they would be excused if they went out to watch the threshing. Gallwey, whose face beamed, surmised that the impression was conveyed to them by Eveline Annersly, though he could not be sure how she had accomplished it.

The dusk came early now, but a full moon was rising above the prairie, and men still toiled about the big machine, whose hum rang through the stillness. Loaded waggons lurched through the crackling stubble. Outside the homestead, Leland sat with his wife, watching them.

"The first wheat we sell will get that crescent back," he said. "The next will take us for two months to New York. We'll start when the snow is on the ground, but it will not be like that first drive we had."

There was a curious little tremor in Carrie Leland's voice. "Charley," she said, "everything is different now. You have driven out the rustlers and you have saved your wheat."

Leland laughed.

"That isn't quite what you mean, and, after all, it wouldn't go very far by itself. The thing that counts the most is that Carrie Leland is content with her prairie farmer."

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Transcriber's Note: The following typographical errors present in the original text have been corrected.

In Chapter II, "Branscome Denham is usually at his wits' end" was changed to "Branscombe Denham is usually at his wits' end".

In Chapter VII, "Galgary" was changed to "Calgary" in two places.

In Chapter XXII, "I hadn't meant to memtion it" was changed to "I hadn't meant to mention it".

In Chapter XXX, "conveyed to them by Eveline Annersley" was changed to "conveyed to them by Eveline Annersly".

The spelling of some words, such as "depot" and "depôt", or "flap-jacks" and "flapjacks", is inconsistent in the original text.

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