

Bindloss Harold

Lorimer of the Northwest



Harold Bindloss

Lorimer of the Northwest

«Public Domain»

Bindloss H.

Lorimer of the Northwest / H. Bindloss — «Public Domain»,

Содержание

PROLOGUE	5
CHAPTER I	7
CHAPTER II	11
CHAPTER III	15
CHAPTER IV	19
CHAPTER V	24
CHAPTER VI	28
CHAPTER VII	33
CHAPTER VIII	38
CHAPTER IX	44
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	46

Bindloss Harold Lorimer of the Northwest

PROLOGUE

Fairmead, Western Canada.

It is a still, hot day in autumn, and there is a droning of mosquitoes where I sit by an open window, glancing alternately out across the Assiniboian prairie and somewhat blankly at the bundle of paper before me, ready to begin this story. Its telling will not be an easy matter, but one finds idle hours pass heavily after a life such as mine has been, and since the bronco blundering into a badger-hole fell and broke my leg the surgeon who rode forty miles to set it said that if I was to work at harvest I must not move before – and the harvest is already near. So I nibble the pen and look around the long match-boarded hall, waiting for the inspiration which is strangely slow in coming, while my wife, who was Grace Carrington, smiles over her sewing and suggests that it is high time to begin.

There are many guns on the wall glistening like sardines with oil rubbed well in, and among them the old Winchester which once saved us from starvation in British Columbia. There are also long rows of painted butterflies and moths whose colors pleased Grace's fancy when I caught them in the sloos. Sometimes I wonder whether she really likes that kind of decoration, or merely pinned them to the wall because I caught them for her. Then, and this is my own fancy, the bit of the horse which once saved her life hangs in a place of its own under the heads of the antelopes and the forward half of a crane with which a Winnipeg taxidermist has travestied nature. There are also a few oil paintings and, of course, some furniture, but I am not learned in such matters, and know only that it cost me many dollars when I brought it from Toronto on one of Grace's birthdays, and I have never regretted the investment.

No, there is nothing here that merits much comment, though Fairmead is one of the finest homesteads between the Saskatchewan and the Souris. Then as I gaze with half-closed eyes through the open window the memories awaken and crowd, as it were, upon one another. Far out on the rim of the prairie lies a silvery haze, through which the vault of azure melts into the dusty whiteness of the grasses. Then, level on level, with each slowly swelling rise growing sharper under that crystalline atmosphere the prairie rolls in, broken here by a willow copse and there by a straggling birch bluff, while a belt of cool neutral shadow marks the course of a deep-sunk ravine. At first sight it is all one glaring sweep of white and gray, but on looking closer with understanding eyes one sees the yellow and sage-green of tall reeds in a sloo, the glowing lights of sun-bleached buffalo bones, and a mingling of many colors where there is wild peppermint or flowers among the grass. Then, broad across the foreground, growing tall and green in a few moister places, and in others changing to ochre and coppery red, there ripples, acre after acre, a great sea of grain whose extent is beyond the comprehension of the insular Briton.

That, at least, with its feathery oat tassels and stately heads of wheat, is a picture well worth looking upon, for there are few places in the world where one may see furrows of equal length. It was won hardly, by much privation, and in the sweat of the brow, as well as by the favor of Providence, as Grace would say, and she is right in most things, except when she attempts to instruct me in stock feeding, for we hold on the prairie that it is not fair to place all the burden on Providence. Therefore the settlers who succeed cut down rations and work double tides to help themselves in time of adversity.

Yes, though better men have done more and failed, we worked hard enough for it, Harry Lorraine and I, stinting ourselves often to feed the stock and deal justly with the soil, until at last the ill-fortune turned and the kindly earth repaid us a hundred fold for our trust in it.

Grace partly approves of the foregoing, for she laid by her sewing to read the loose sheets beside me, bending down until her hair, which is bronze-gold with the sun in it, just touched my own. It may be that my eyes are prejudiced, but I have never seen a woman who might compare with her. Neither has her comeliness faded. Instead, it has grown even more refined and stately, for Grace had always a queenly way, since the day when I first met her, the fairest maid – I think so now, though it is long ago – that ever trod the bleak moorlands of eastern Lancashire.

Beyond the wheat and straggling birches I can see the shingled roofs of Harry's dwelling. We have long been partners – all the Winnipeg dealers know the firm of Lorimer & Lorraine, and how they send their wheat in by special freight train. Then there is a stretch of raw breaking, and the tinkle of the binders rises out of a hidden hollow, as tireless arms of wood and steel pile up the sheaves of Jasper's crop – Jasper takes a special pride in forestalling us. The dun smoke of a smudge-fire shows that Harry is in prairie fashion protecting our stock, and I see it drifting eastward across the dusty plain, with the cattle seeking shelter from the mosquitoes under it.

The management of a farm like Fairmead is a serious task, even when there are two to do it, and Grace says there are weighty responsibilities attached. How many toilers in crowded Europe benefit by the cheap flour we send them I do not know, though last year we kept the Winnipeg millers busy; but when, in conjunction with a certain society, we opened new lands and homes for the homeless poor – it was Grace's pet project – all those who occupied them were not thankful. Some also stole their neighbors' chickens, and the said neighbors abused us. Others seemed more inclined to live on one another than to wrest a living from the soil, while once Macdonald of the Northwest Police lodged a solemn protest, "We'll hold ye baith responsible for the depredations o' the wastrels who're disturbing the harmony o' this peaceful prairie."

Still, Harry and I were once poor enough ourselves, and with Grace's help we have done our best to weed out the worthless – Harry attends to this – and encourage the rest. Very many bushels of seed-wheat has Grace given them, and here as elsewhere there are considerably more good than bad, while already a certain society takes to itself the credit of the flourishing Fairmead colony. Harry, however, says that undeserved prosperity has made me an optimist. But the reader will wonder how I, Ralph Lorimer, who landed in Canada with one hundred pounds' capital, became owner of Fairmead and married Grace, only daughter and heiress of Colonel Carrington. Well, that is a long story, and looking back at the beginning of it instead of at the sunlit prairie I see a grimy smoke-blackened land where gaunt chimneys stand in rows, and behind it the bare moors of Lancashire. Then again the memories change like the glasses of a kaleidoscope, and I sigh as I remember comrades who helped us in our necessity and who now, forgotten by all save a few, sleep among the snow-bound ranges, under the bitter alkali dust, and deep in the smoking cañons through which we carried the new steel highway.

Failures, probably their friends called them at home, but in this their friends were wrong. With light jest, or grim silent endurance, they played out the lost game to the bitter end, and laid the foundations of a great country's prosperity, while if fate or fortune has favors for but the few, those who receive them should remember with becoming humility what otherwise they might have been. So the past comes back, struggle, disappointment, and slow success, at last, until it is a relief when Harry Lorraine strides laughing in and Grace fills for him a great polished horn of cider.

"Here's success to your story! Tell them simply how we live and work, and some of us, the best, have died in this land," he says. Then he raises the horn high toward the rafters and I know his meaning. It is a way the forerunners of civilization – axe-man, paddle-man, and railroad shoveler – had, and he did it in memory of one who lies far off among the northern snows. Taking up the weary pen as he and Grace go out together I prepare to follow his counsel, telling the story simply and as it happened from the beginning.

CHAPTER I

THE FIRST SOWING

It was late in autumn, and the heather had faded into dingy brown, though long streaks of golden fern crept winding down, when Grace Carrington first talked with me of the Canadian Dominion on the bleak slopes of Starcross Moor. There was a hollow in the hillside where a few pale-stemmed birches and somber firs formed, as it were, a rampart between the poor, climbing meadows and the waste of gorse and fern, and we two beneath them seemed utterly alone in the moorland solitude.

Grace sat on a lichened boulder with the sunlight upon her, gazing down across the levels of Lancashire. I was just twenty years old, and she seemed the incarnation of all that was fresh and good in early womanhood. Still, it was not only her beauty that attracted me, though she was the well-dowered daughter of a race which has long been famous for fair women, but a certain grave dignity that made her softly spoken wishes seem commands that it would be a pleasure to obey. Grace was nineteen then, and she lived in Western Canada with her widowed father, Colonel Carrington, who had made himself a power in that country. Yet she was English by birth and early training, of the fair-haired, gray-eyed, old Lancashire stock, and had lost nothing by her sojourn on the prairie as youthful mistress of Carrington Manor.

The land which ran west before us was not a pleasant one. Across its horizon hung a pall of factory smoke; and unlovely hamlets, each with its gaunt pit-head gear and stark brick chimney, sprinkled the bare fields between, for hedgerows were scanty and fences of rusty colliery rope replaced them. Yet it was a wealthy country, and bred keen-witted, enterprising men, who, uncouth often in speech and exterior, possessed an energy that has spread their commerce to the far corners of the earth. That day the autumn haze wrapped a mellow dimness round its defects, but Grace Carrington sighed as she turned toward me.

"I shall not be sorry to go home again," she said. "Perhaps I miss our clear sunshine, but here everyone looks careworn in your dingy towns, and there are so many poor. Besides, the monotony of those endless smoky streets oppresses me. No, I should not care to come back to Lancashire."

Now, the words of a young and winsome woman seldom fall lightly on the ears of a young man, and Grace spoke without affectation as one accustomed to be listened to, which was hardly surprising in the heiress of Carrington. As it happened, they wakened an answering echo within me. The love of the open sky had been handed down to me through long generations of a yeoman ancestry, and yet fate had apparently decreed that I should earn my bread in the counting-house of a cotton-mill. It is probable that I should have been abashed and awkward before this patrician damsel in a drawing-room, but here, under the blue lift, with the brown double-barrel – it was my uncle's new hammerless – across my knees, and the speckled birds beneath, I felt in harmony with the surroundings, and accordingly at ease. I was born and bred under the other edge of the moor.

"It does not always rain here, though this has been a wet season, and trade is bad," I said. "Will you tell me about Canada, Miss Carrington?"

Her eyes brightened as she answered: "It is my adopted country, and I love it. Still it is no place for the weak and idle, for as they say out there, we have no room for any but live men and strong. Yet, I never saw a ragged woman nor heard of a hungry child. All summer the settlers work from dawn to dusk under the clear sunshine of the open prairie, paying rent to no one, for each tills his own land, and though there are drawbacks – drought, hail, and harvest-frost – they meet them lightly, for you see neither anxious faces nor bent shoulders there. Our people walk upright, as becomes free men. Then, through the long winter, when the snow lies firm and white, and the wheat crop has been hauled in, you can hear the jingling sleigh teams flit across the prairie from homestead to homestead under the cloudless blue. The settlers enjoy themselves when their work is done – and we have no drunkenness."

She ceased, turning an eager face toward me, and I felt an old longing increase. It was the inborn love of a fertile soil – and that wide sunlit country seemed to call me, for my father had been the last of a long family to hold one of the extensive farms which with their crumbling feudal halls may yet be found in the remoter corners of Lancashire. Then, asking practical questions, I wondered as Grace Carrington answered, because, though she wore the stamp of refinement to her finger-tips, she knew all that concerned the feeding of stock, and the number of bushels that might be thrashed from an acre of wheat. I knew she spoke as one having experience, for I had been taught to till the soil, and only entered the cotton-mill when on my father's death it was found that his weakness for horses and his unlucky experiments had rendered it impossible that I should carry on the farm. So, while unobserved the sun sank low, I listened eagerly; until at last there was a sound of footsteps among the fern, and she ceased, after a glance at her watch. But, like the grain she spoke of, drilled into the black Assiniboian loam, the seed had been sown, and in due time the crop would ripen to maturity.

A man came out from the birches, a handsome man, glancing about him with a look of indolent good humor on his face, and though for a moment Grace Carrington seemed displeased, she showed no sign of it as she rose leisurely to meet him.

"I am sorry you had to come in search of me, Geoffrey," she said; "this is Mr. Lorimer – Captain Ormond. I think you have met before. I lost my way, and he kindly brought me across the moor. I have been telling him about Canada."

The newcomer bowed with an easy indifference, for which, not knowing exactly why, I disliked him, as he said, "Don't remember that pleasure – meet so many people! Canada must be a very nice place; been thinking of going out there myself – drive oxen, grow potatoes, and that kind of thing, you know."

He glanced at Grace, as though seeking her approval of such an act of self-sacrifice; but the girl laughed frankly as she answered, "I can't fancy you tramping behind the plow in a jacket patched with flour-bags, Geoffrey;" while, feeling myself overlooked, and not knowing what to say, I raised my cap and awkwardly turned away. Still, looking back, I caught the waft of a light dress among the fern, and frowned as the sound of laughter came down the wind. These people had been making merry, I thought, at my expense, though I had fancied Miss Carrington incapable of such ungenerous conduct.

In this, however, I misjudged her, for long afterward I learned that Grace was laughing at the stories her companion told of his strange experiences with sundry recruits, until presently the latter said:

"She stoops to conquer, even a raw Lancashire lad. I congratulate you on your judgment, Gracie. There is something in that untrained cub – could recognize it by the steady, disapproving way he looked at me; but I am some kind of a relative, which is presumably a warrant for impertinence."

Now a saving sense of humor tempered Miss Carrington's seriousness, and Geoffrey Ormond joined in her merry laugh. In spite of his love of ease and frivolous badinage, he was, as I was to learn some day, considerably less of a good-natured fool than it occasionally pleased him to appear to be.

Meantime, I strode homeward with the fierce longing growing stronger. I hated the dingy office where I sat under a gas-jet making up the count of yarn; and yet four weary years I had labored there, partly because I had to earn my bread and because my uncle and sole guardian greatly desired I should. It grew dark as I entered the valley which led to his house, for the cotton-spinner now lived ten miles by rail from his mill, and the sighing of the pine branches under a cold breeze served to increase my restlessness. So it was with a sense of relief that I found my cousin Alice waiting in a cosy corner of the fire-lit drawing-room. We had known each other from childhood, and, though for that very reason this is not always the case, we were the best of friends. She would be rich some day, so the men I met in her father's business said; but if Alice Lorimer ever remembered the fact, it made but little difference to her. She was delicate, slight, and homely, with a fund of shrewd common-sense and a very kindly heart, whose thoughts, however, she did not always reveal. Now she sat on a lounge

before the fire, with the soft light of a colored lamp falling upon her, while a great embroidered screen shut off the rest of the partly-darkened room.

"I have been waiting for you with the tea so patiently, Ralph," she said. "You look tired and moody – you have been out on the moors too long. See, here is a low chair ready just inside the screen, and here is the tea. Sit down and tell me what is troubling you."

I settled myself in the corner, and answered, looking into the fire:

"You were always kind to me, Alice, and one can talk to you. Something made me unsettled to-day, and I didn't care about the birds, though I got a plump brace for you. Alice, I can't help thinking that these brief holidays, though they are like a glimpse of Paradise after my dingy rooms in that sickening town, are not good for me. I am only a poor clerk in your father's mill, and such things as guns and horses are out of my sphere. They only stir up useless longings. So I return on Monday, and hardly think that I shall come back for a long time."

Alice laughed softly, for she was a shrewd young person, then she laid her little hand restrainingly on my arm, before she said:

"And who has a better right to the bay horse and the new hammerless ejector than the nephew of the man who never uses them? Now, I'm guessing at a secret, but it's probable that your uncle bought that gun especially for you. Ralph, you are getting morbid – and you have not been shooting all day. Did you meet Miss Carrington on the moor again?"

Now in such matters I was generally a blunderer; yet something warned me that my answer would displease her. I could, however, see no way of avoiding it, and when I said as unconcernedly as I could, "Yes, and talked to her about Canada!" Alice for no particular reason stooped and dropped a thread into the fire. Then lifting her head she looked at me steadily when I continued, with some hesitation:

"You know how I was always taught that in due time I should work the lands of Lindale Hall, and how, when we found on my father's death that there was nothing left, I tried the cotton-mill. Well, after four years' trial I like it worse than I did at the beginning, and now I feel that I must give it up. I am going back to the soil again, even if it is across the sea."

Alice made no answer for a few moments; then she said slowly: "Ralph you will not be rash; think it over well. Now tell me if you have any definite plans – you know how I always used to advise you?"

I felt I needed sympathy, and Alice was a faithful confidant, so I opened my heart to her, and she listened with patient interest. It seemed to me that my cousin had never looked so winsome as she sat close beside me with a slight flush of color in her usually pale face where the soft lamplight touched it. So we sat and talked until Martin Lorimer entered unobserved, and when, on hearing a footstep, I looked up I saw that he was smiling with what seemed grim approval as his eyes rested on us, and this puzzled me. Then his daughter started almost guiltily as he said, "I wondered where you two were. Dinner has been waiting, and you never heard the bell."

I retired early that night, and, being young, forgot my perplexities in heavy slumber. The next morning I noticed that Alice's eyes seemed heavy, and I wondered what could be the reason. In after years I mentioned it when Grace and I were talking about old times together, but she only smiled gravely, and said, "I sometimes think your cousin was too good for this world."

The next day was one of those wet Sundays which it is hard to forget. The bleak moor was lost in vapor, and a pitiless drizzle came slanting down the valley, while the raw air seemed filled with falling leaves. A prosperous man with a good conscience may make light of such things, but they leave their own impression on the poor and anxious; so, divided between two courses, I wandered up and down, finding rest nowhere until I chanced upon a large new atlas in my uncle's library. Martin Lorimer was proud of his library. He was a well-read man, though like others of his kind he made no pretense at scholarship, and used the broad, burring dialect when he spoke in his mill. Here I found occupation studying the Dominion of Canada, especially the prairie territories, and lost myself in

dreams of half-mile furrows and a day's ride straight as the crow flies across a cattle run, all of which, though I scarcely dared hope it then, came true in its own appointed time.

My uncle had ridden out early, for he was to take part in the new mayor's state visit to church in the manufacturing town, and even Alice seemed out of spirits, so when I left the library there was the weary afternoon to be dragged through somehow. It passed very slowly, and then as I stood by the stables a man from the house at the further end of the valley, where Colonel Carrington was staying, said to our stable lad:

"I mun hurry back. Our folks are wantin' t' horses; maister an' t' Colonel's daughter's going to the church parade. They're sayin' it's a grand turnout, wi' t' firemen, bands, an' t' volunteers, in big brass helmets!"

Neither of them saw me, and presently calling the lad I bade him put the bay horse into the dog-cart.

"He's in a gradely bad temper," said the lad doubtfully. "Not done nothink but eat for a long time now, an' he nearly bit a piece out of me; I wish t' maister would shoot him."

I laughed at the warning, though I had occasion to remember it, and looking for Alice I said, "I am driving in to church to-night. Would you like to come with me?"

Now Alice Lorimer possessed her father's keen perception, and when he kept his temper he was perhaps the shrewdest man I ever met; so when she looked me straight in the face I dropped my eyes, because I really was not anxious for her company, and should not have gone except in the hope of seeing Grace Carrington.

"Have you turned religious suddenly, Ralph?" she asked. "Or have you forgotten you told me yesterday that you did not care to go?"

I made some awkward answer, but Alice smiled dryly, and with a solemn courtesy said:

"Two are company, three are none. Cousin Ralph, I will not go with you. But don't leave the dog-cart behind and come back with the shafts."

I went out with a flushed face, and a sense of relief, angry, nevertheless, that she should read my inmost thoughts, having fancied that my invitation was a stroke of diplomacy. I learned afterward that diplomacy is a mistake for the simple man. With a straightforward "Yes" or "No" he can often turn aside the schemes of the cunning, but on forsaking these he generally finds the other side considerably too clever for him – all of which is a wanton digression from the story.

CHAPTER II

THE CHURCH PARADE

It was raining hard when I climbed into the dog-cart and rattled away into the darkness, while somewhat to my surprise Robert the Devil, or Devilish Bob, as those who had the care of him called the bay horse, played no antics on the outward journey, which was safely accomplished. So leaving him at the venerable "Swan," I hurried through the miry streets toward the church. They were thronged with pale-faced men and women who had sweated out their vigor in the glare of red furnace, dye-shop, and humming mill, but there was no lack of enthusiasm. I do not think there are any cities in the world with the same public spirit and pride in local customs that one may find in the grimy towns of Lancashire. The enthusiasm is, however, part of their inhabitants' nature, and has nothing to do with the dismal surroundings.

A haze of smoke had mingled with the rain; yellow gas jets blinked through it, though it would not be dark for an hour or so yet; and the grim, smoke-blackened houses seemed trickling with water. Still every one laughed and chattered with good-humored expectancy, even the many who had no umbrellas. It was hard work to reach the church, though I opined that all the multitude did not intend to venture within, and when once I saw my uncle with a wand in his hand I carefully avoided him. Martin Lorimer was a power and well liked in that town, but I had not driven ten miles to assist him. Then I waited among the jostling crowd in a fever of impatience, wondering whether Miss Carrington had yet gone in, until at last I saw the Colonel marching through the throng, which – and knowing the temperament of our people I wondered at it – made way for him. There were others of the party behind, and my heart leaped at the sight of Grace. She was walking beside Captain Ormond, who smiled down at her.

Then, just as the Colonel passed within, a burst of cheering broke out, and in the mad scramble for the entrance Grace, who turned a moment to recover the cloak she dropped, was separated from her companion. He was driven forward in the thickest part of the stream of excited human beings, and fortune had signally favored me. Squeezing through from behind a pillar I reached her side, and grew hot with pride when she slipped her arm through mine, and we were borne forward irresistibly by the surging crowd. Once I saw Ormond vainly trying to make his way back in search of his companion, and I stood so that he could not see her. Half-way down the aisle we met an official who recognized me as a nephew of Martin Lorimer. "I'll find you and the lady seats in the chancel. It will be the only good place left," he said.

I did not care where we went, as long as Grace went with me, and when he ensconced us under an oaken canopy among the ancient carved stalls I longed that the service might last a century, while Grace's quiet "Thank you, I am so interested," filled me with ecstasy.

The church was interesting. There are many cathedrals that could not compare with it; and it was very old. The damp haze had entered the building, and obscuring half the clearstory it enhanced its stateliness, for the great carved pillars and arches led the wandering eye aloft and lost it in a mystery, while far up at the western end above the organ a gilded Gloria caught a stray shaft of light and blazed out of the gloom. I saw Grace's eyes rest on it, and then I followed them down across the sea of faces, along the quaint escutcheons, and over two marble tombs, until she fixed them on her father, who with his party sat in a high-backed pew. The crash of music outside ceased, and with a steady tramp of feet, file by file, men in scarlet uniform moved up the aisle; while before them, led by the sword and gilded mace, came a little homely man, who seemed burdened by his glittering chain, and most uncomfortable. As I knew, he commenced his business career with ten pounds' capital, and could hardly speak plain English, while now his goods were known in every bazaar from Cairo to Singapore. This knowledge fostered a vague but daring hope within me.

I remember little of the service beyond Grace's voice ringing high and clear in the "Magnificat," while for perhaps the first time I caught a glimmer of its full significance, and her face, clean-cut against the shadow where a fretted pinnacle allowed one shaft of light to pass it, looking, I thought, like that of a haloed saint. The rest was all a blurred impression of rolling music, half-seen faces, and gay uniforms, until a tall old man of commanding personality stood high aloft in the carved pulpit, and proclaimed a doctrine that seemed strangely out of place in the busy town. Honest labor brought its own reward in the joy of diligent toil, he said, and the prize of fame or money was a much slighter thing. I could not quite understand this then, for there were many in that district whose daily toil wore body and soul away, so that none of them might hope to live out half of man's allotted span, while a prize for which I would have given my life sat close beside me, and twice that evening the calm proud eyes had smiled gratefully into mine.

Still, there was one drawback. As chance would have it, Minnie Lee, who operated the typewriter in the mill offices, sat just opposite, and would cast mischievous glances toward me. We were good friends in a way, for during two years I had talked to her on business matters every day, and sometimes also indulged in innocent badinage. She was fair-haired and delicately pretty, and was said to be aware of it; but now of all times I did not want those playful smiles directed toward me. However, I hoped that Grace did not see them; and not knowing what else to do, for I could not frown at her, I sought refuge in what proved to be a bewildering chapter of genealogy, until the building trembled as the vast assembly joined in the closing hymn. Long afterward, out on the lone prairie when the stars shone down through the bitter frost, I could hear in fancy Grace's voice rising beside me through the great waves of sound. Then I would remember the song of the speckled thrush singing at sunset after a showery April day through the shadow of a copse.

We reached the street safely, though in that press there was no hope of finding Colonel Carrington, even if I wished it, which I certainly did not, so after some demur and the discussing of other expedients, Grace accepted my offer to drive her home. "I am afraid it can't be helped," she said, I thought with quite unnecessary cruelty.

The dog-cart was ready, and Robert the Devil went well. The long streets rolled behind us, and were lost in the rain; then with a rhythmic drumming of hoofs and a constant splashing from under the whirring wheels, we swept out into the blackness of a treeless plain. I knew the road and did not take the shortest one; and it was rapture to draw the rugs and apron round Grace's waist, and feel the soft furs she wore brushing against me. The ten miles passed in what seemed to be scarcely as many minutes, and the rush through the damp air – for the rain had ceased at last – raised my companion's spirits, and she chatted merrily; then, just as we reached the crest of a steep dip into the Starcross valley, the Devil must take fright at a colored railway light that he had often seen before.

I knew we were in for a struggle, and got both hands on the reins; but two men would hardly have held him. The next moment, with a mad rattle of wheels and red sparks flashing under the battering hoofs, we went flying into the long dark hollow, while I think I prayed that the Devil might keep his footing on the loose stones of a very bad road. One lurch flung Grace against the guard-rail, the next against my shoulder, and I remember feeling when the little hand fastened on my arm, that I would gladly have done battle with ten wild horses were she also not in jeopardy. Fresh drizzle lashed our faces, the wind screamed past, the wheels seemed to leave the ground alternately, and a light rushed up toward us from below, while with my teeth hard set I wondered what would happen when we reached the sharp bend at the bottom.

I got the Devil around it somehow, and then breathed easier, for the steep slope of Starcross Brow rose close ahead, and I knew no horse was ever foaled which could run away up that. So, trusting to one hand, I slipped my arm round Grace's waist, and, thrilled at the touch of her damp hair on my neck, "I'll hold you safe; we are near the end, and the danger will soon be past," I said.

It turned out so, for though Robert the Devil charged the hill gallantly, Starcross Brow proved too much for him, and, with a sigh of relief, Grace drew herself away. "I must thank you, Mr. Lorimer. You drive well," she said.

Then I thought that if she had been like Minnie, or even cousin Alice, I might have ventured to replace the protecting arm, but there was something about Grace Carrington that made one treat her, as it were, with reverence. When we drew up in front of Starcross House a carriage with flashing lamps stood in the drive; I had seen those lights coming down the opposite side of the valley. After Grace had thanked me with a quiet friendliness as I helped her down, a group turned to meet us at the door. The first was a tall, thin-faced man of commanding presence with a long gray moustache, and he stared hard at me with a haughtiness that I fancied was tinctured with contempt, while Captain Ormond stood behind him, smiling languidly and lifted a warning finger unobserved to Grace. There was something forbidding about Colonel Carrington, and to the last few men liked him. I remember Harry Lorraine once comparing him to Coriolanus – "Steeped in pride to the backbone," said Harry, "but it's a clean pride, and there's a good deal of backbone about him."

"I am glad to see you safe, Grace," he commenced. "We were rather anxious about you. But where have you been, and how did we pass you?"

I never saw Grace either confused or taken by surprise, and when she explained quietly her father looked down at me from the top step as he said, "I thank you, sir, but I did not catch the name. May I ask who it is to whom we are so much indebted? Neither do I quite understand yet how we got here before you."

There was nothing in the words, but the glance and tone conveyed the idea that he regretted the debt, while the whimsical look on Ormond's face aided in stirring me, for we had democratic notions in that part of Lancashire.

"Ralph Lorimer, assistant cashier in the Orb Mill," I said. "It was a slight service, and I did not consider the shortest way best;" while before the Colonel could answer I raised my hat to Grace, and, taking Robert the Devil's head, turned him sharply around. Still, as I climbed into the dog-cart I saw that the burly master of Starcross House was chuckling at something, and I drove away feeling strangely satisfied with myself, until I began to wonder whether after all to walk twice off the field defiantly before the enemy was not another form of cowardice. Alice met me on the threshold – for she heard the wheels – with a query as to why the Satanic Robert was in such a state; but for several reasons I did not fully enlighten her.

My uncle did not return that night, and I left for town the next morning. In the afternoon I sought an interview with him in his private office. It was with some trepidation that I entered, because Martin Lorimer was frank of speech and quick in temper, and I knew he was then busy with the details of a scheme that might double the output of his mill. He thrust the papers away and leaned forward on his desk, a characteristic specimen of his race, square in jaw and shoulder, with keenness and power stamped on his wrinkled face.

"Well, Ralph, what is it now?" he asked. "Johnson of Starcross has been telling me some tale about your running away with an heiress and giving his answer to Colonel Carrington. I'm not altogether sorry. I do not like that man. There is also a reason why he doesn't like me."

"It has nothing to do with that, sir," I answered awkwardly. "You know I have never asked questions about the family money; and you have been very kind to me. But the fact is I can't stand the mill, and I'm thinking of asking for whatever remains of my share and going out to Canada."

Martin Lorimer smote the desk suddenly with his fist, and there was angry bewilderment in his eyes.

"Hast gone mad altogether, lad?" he asked.

I met his gaze steadily. "No," I answered. "I can't help longing for a life in the open air; and there is room in Canada for poor people like me."

Then, thrusting his square jaw forward, he said: "Thy father left four hundred pounds in all. It is now five, under my stewardship. Shall I ask the cashier to make out a statement? Thy father had whims and fancies, or it would have been four thousand. Tom Lorimer could never see which side of his bread was buttered. He was born a fool, like thee."

Flinging back my head I rose facing him. But he thundered, "Stop! You ought to know my meaning. He was an open-handed gentleman, and my well-loved brother. If you take your share of the five hundred, what is going to educate your brother Reggie and your sister Aline? I presume you know the fees they charge at both those schools? And did you ever ask whether I had plans for thee?"

I was silent a moment. For the first time it struck me with sudden shame that Martin Lorimer had already most generously done his best to start his brother's orphans well in life. Then I answered slowly:

"I beg your pardon. I recognize your goodness; but I know I should never be successful in the mill. I'm sorry, but that is only the simple truth. Let Reggie and Aline keep all, except enough for a third-class passage to Winnipeg. This is not a rash whim. It has taken me three years to make up my mind."

"Then there's an end of the matter," said Martin Lorimer. "Stubbornness is in the family, and you are your father's son. An archangel would hardly have moved poor Tom! Well, lad, you shall not go penniless, nor third-class, if it's only for the credit of the name; and you can't go until spring. I thank thee for telling me; but I'm busy, and we'll talk again. Hast told thy cousin Alice about it?"

His eyes had lost their angry flash before I went out, and something in his change of tone revealed the hard bargain-maker's inner self.

Minnie Lee smiled over the typewriter as I passed her room, and I went in to tell her about it. I felt I must talk to some one; and, if not gifted with much sense, she was a sympathetic girl. She listened with a pretty air of dismay, and said petulantly, "So I shall lose my only friend in this dreary mill! Don't they pay high wages for my work in Montreal and Winnipeg? Well, if you hear of a situation you can send straight back for me."

Then a door slammed, and I saw a frown on my uncle's face as, perhaps attracted by the sound of voices, he glanced into the room on passing. Still, it was some time afterward before I learned that he had heard the last words; and, remembering them eventually when recalled by events, Minnie's careless speech proved an unfortunate one for both of us.

CHAPTER III

“THE LAND OF PROMISE”

It was a dismal afternoon in early spring when I lounged disconsolately about the streets of Winnipeg. The prairie metropolis had not then attained its present magnitude, but it was busy and muddy enough; for when the thaw comes the mire of a Western town is indescribable. Also odd showers of wet snow came down, and I shivered under my new skin coat, envying the busy citizens who, with fur caps drawn low down, hurried to and fro. One and all wore the stamp of prosperity, and their voices had a cheerful ring that grated on me, for I of all that bustling crowd seemed idle and without a purpose. So, feeling utterly forlorn, a stranger in a very strange and, at first sight, a forbidding land, I trudged up and down, waiting for the evening train which was to bear me west, and pondering over all that had happened during the past few weeks.

There was the parting with my uncle, who laid a strong hand on my shoulder and lapsed into the speech of the country as he said, “I need not tell thee to set thy teeth and hang on through the first few years, lad. Thy father played out a losing game only too staunchly; and it’s stey work at the beginning. I mind when I started the mill – but that’s an old story. It’s the man who can grin and bear it, coming up smiling after each fall, who wins in the end. And thou hast all the world before thee. Still, remember there are staunch friends behind thee here in Lancashire.”

I think his fingers shook a little, but Martin Lorimer was not addicted to much display of sentiment, and with a cough he hurried away; though I remember that the old cashier, who had served him since he started, putting a sealed envelope in my hand, said:

“It’s a draft for one hundred pounds on the Bank of Montreal, and it’s a secret; but I’m not debiting the estate with it. Thou’rt a gradely fool for thy trouble, Ralph Lorimer. But I knew thy father, and, like him, thou mun go thy own way. Well, maybe it’s for the best; and good luck go with thee.”

Next came my farewell from cousin Alice, who blushed as, laying before me a fine Winchester repeating rifle, which must have cost her some trouble to obtain in England then, she said:

“It’s only a little keepsake, but I thought you would like it – and you will remember your cousin when you use it. Ralph, you have chosen to work out your own destiny, and for many a night your uncle fumed over it until at last he said that the child who fought for scraps in the gutter grew to be worth any two of the spoon-fed. You know how fond he is of forcible simile, and he frowned when I suggested that Canada was not a gutter. Still, it is too late to consider whether you did well, and I ask, as a last favor, if you are ever unfortunate, if only for the sake of old times, you will let us know. And now I wish you all prosperity. Good-bye, Ralph dear, and God bless you.”

Her eyes were dim, and she looked so small and fragile that I stooped and kissed her, while though she drew herself suddenly away with the crimson mantling upward from her neck, I felt that whatever happened I had a friend for life in Alice Lorimer.

Now all of that had faded into the past that I had left behind across the sea, and henceforward I knew there must be no more glancing back. I had chosen my own path, and must press forward with eyes turned steadfastly ahead, although at present I could see no further than the prairie station that I would reach some time before dawn the next day. A wheat-grower’s dwelling thirty miles back from the railroad was registered as wanting assistance, the immigration officer said. Slowly, with more snow and a freshening of the bitter wind, the afternoon wore itself away, and I was glad when that evening I boarded the west-bound train. It was thronged with emigrants of many nationalities, and among them were Scandinavian maidens, tow-haired and red-cheeked, each going out to the West to be married. Their courtship would be brief and unromantic, but, as I was afterward to learn, three-fourths of the marriages so made turned out an unqualified success. Still, I found a corner in the

smoking end of a long Colonist car, and, with the big bell clanging and a storm of voices exchanging farewells in many tongues, the great locomotive hauled us out into the whirling snow.

Thick flakes beat on the windows, and icy draughts swept through the car, while the big stove in a boxed-in corner hummed with a drowsy roar. With half-closed eyes I leaned back against the hard maple while the preceding scenes of the long journey rolled like a panorama before me. Twelve days it took the ancient steamer, which swarmed like a hive, to thrash through mist and screaming gale across the Atlantic, while fifteen hundred emigrants below wished themselves dead. Then there followed an apparently endless transit in the lurching cars, where we slept as best we could on uncushioned seats and floor, through dark pine forests, with only an occasional tin-roofed hamlet to break the monotony. After that there were wooden cities in Ontario very much like the hamlets of a larger growth; and when at last sickened by the vibration, we sped out on to the long-expected prairie, the prospect was by no means inviting. Spring, I was told, was very late that year, and the plains rolled before us to the horizon a dreary white wilderness streaked by willow-swale, with at first many lonely lakes rippling a bitter steely-blue under the blasts, while crackling ice fringed their shores. Then several of my companions, who were young and romantic Britons with big revolvers strapped about them under their jackets, grew suspiciously quiet, and said no more about the strange adventures they had looked for in the West. There was nothing romantic about this land, which lacked even the clear skies Grace Carrington spoke of. It looked a hard country, out of which only a man with the power of stubborn endurance could wrest a living.

So with a rhythmic beat of whirring wheels, and now and again a clash of couplings as we slid down some hollow of the track, we rolled on through the night, while the scream of wind grew louder outside the rattling cars. I was nearly asleep when there came a sudden shock, and the conductor's voice rang out warning us to leave the train. At slackened speed we had run into a snow block, and the wedge-headed plow was going, so he said, to plug the drifts under a full pressure, and butt her right straight through.

Shivering to the backbone, I dropped from the platform into two feet of snow, and after floundering through it I halted among a group of excited men behind the two huge locomotives. For a newcomer it was a striking scene. The snow had ceased, and watery moonlight lit up the great white plain, in the midst of which, with the black smoke of the engines drifting across under a double column of roaring steam, stood the illuminated train. There was nothing else to show that man had ever been there before, except the spectral row of telegraph posts that dwindled in long perspective to the horizon. Ahead a billowy drift which filled a hollow rose level with the wedge-shape framing on the snow-plow front. They run both better plows and more luxurious Colonist cars now.

"Will they get through?" I asked a tall man in fur robes with whom I had chatted.

"Oh, yes, you just bet they will," he answered cheerfully. "Jim Grant and Number Sixty are a very bad pair to beat; he'll either jump the track or rush her through it. He's backing her out now for the first lead."

With a clang of the bell to warn us off the line, the coupled engines slowly shoved the long train back the way they had come. Then the roar of blown-off steam grew still, and with loud blasts from the funnels that rapidly quickened they swept again down the slight grade like snorting giants, the huge head-lamp casting a blaze of radiance before them. It went out suddenly; I heard the thud of a soft but heavy shock, and long waves of whiteness curled up, while above it there was a hurling aloft of red sparks from the twin funnels. Then the tail-light glimmered more brightly as it returned again, and we looked into the steep hollow with rammed-back slopes out of which the engines backed slowly.

"She'll do it sure next time," said the passenger. "Grant's going right back to Winnipeg to get on speed enough;" and under an eddying blast of steam the massive locomotives charged past us once more, while I felt a thrill as I watched them, and envied Grant, the engineer. It was something to hold that power in the hollow of one's hand. Thick white powder whirled aloft like smoke before them, a filmy wavy mass that seemed alive rolled aside, while presently the whistle boomed in triumph,

and there was an exultant shout from the passengers, for steam had vanquished the snow, and the road lay open before us. Blundering down the gap they had made I climbed on board the train, colder than ever. As my new friend seemed a native of the neighborhood, I asked him whether he knew the farmer to whom I was going to offer my services.

He laughed as he answered: "I ought to. Beat me badly over a deal in stock he did. Old Coombs is a Britisher, and a precious low-grade specimen. Dare say he'll take you, but stick him for half as much again as he offers you, and bargain *ex* harvest – you'll get double wages anywhere then – see? How does this great country strike you – don't think much of it? – well, go slow and steady and it will grow on you. It's good enough for me, and I was raised on the best land in Ontario."

This was not encouraging, but I knew that most beginnings are unpleasant, and I went shivering to sleep until in the gray twilight of what might have been a mid-winter dawn a blast of the whistle awakened me and the brakes began to scream. The train ran slowly past an edifice resembling a sod stable with one light in it, stopped, and the conductor strode into the car. Even now the Western railroad conductor is a personage, but he might have been an emperor then, and this particular specimen had lorded it over the Colonist passengers in a manner that for several days had made me long to rebuke him. It was foolish, of course, but I was as yet new to the ways of the country, and I fear we were always a somewhat combative family.

"Any one for Elktail? Jump off; we can't wait all night with the west-bound mail," he said. "Say you," looking at me, "you had an Elktail ticket. Why aren't you getting off?"

"It's Vermont I am bound for," I answered sleepily. "You will see it on my ticket if you look in your wallet;" but this, of course, the magnate refused to do, and when another hoot of the whistle announced the engineer's impatience he called a brakeman, saying:

"You are bound for Elktail, and we've no time for fooling. Won't get off? Well, we'll soon put you," and, grasping my shoulder, he hustled me toward the platform of the car.

Now, though Martin Lorimer sometimes gave way to outbreaks of indignation, he was fond of impressing the fact on me that if forced into a quarrel one should take the first steps deliberately. Also, even then I remembered that Coombs' homestead lay almost as near Elktail, and a happy thought struck me. So I offered but little resistance until, as we stood on the platform, the brakeman or some one waved a lantern; then, while with a shock of couplings the cars commenced to move, I gripped the guard-rail with one hand and held the other ready, for I had determined if I left that train before I reached Vermont the conductor should certainly leave it too.

"Off with you!" he shouted, and shook me by the shoulder; but I seized him by the waist – the cars were moving faster now – and then flung myself off backward into the snow. I fell softly for as it happened the conductor fell under me, and, profiting by experience hardly earned in several colliery disputes, I took the precaution of sitting on him before he could get up.

"It won't be my fault if you get hurt because you don't keep still," I said.

Then there was a roar of laughter close by, and staring breathless down the track I saw the tail-light of the train grow dimmer across the prairie until it stopped and came swinging toward us again.

"I'd rather have lost five dollars than missed that," said my new friend, rubbing his hands. "Not bad for a raw Britisher – put the boss conductor off his own train and held up the Vancouver mail! Say, what are you going to do with him, sonny?"

"He can get up, and learn to be civil," I answered grimly; and when the man did so, sullenly, the other said:

"Well, I don't want any mess-up with the brakeman, so we may as well walk out now that they're coming back for him. Only one man in this shanty, and he wouldn't turn out unless it were a director. Leave your baggage where they dumped it – can't move it until daylight – and come along with me!"

I did so somewhat regretfully, for I felt just then that if this was the way they welcomed the emigrant in that country it would be a relief to do battle with the whole of them. Afterward I learned that when one understands his ways, which is difficult to do at first, there are many good qualities in

the Western railroad-man. Still, I always wondered why the friendless newcomer should be considered a fair mark for petty hostility, especially by those who formerly were poor themselves – all of which applies only to city-bred men who hold some small office, for those who live by hard labor in forest and prairie would share their last crust with the stranger.

We trudged away from the station, with a square block of wooden houses rising nakedly in front of us from the prairie, and two gaunt elevators flanking it to left and right beside the track, which is one's usual first impression of a Western town. The rambling wooden building which combined the callings of general store and hotel was all in darkness, for the owner expected no guests just then, and would not have got up for any one but my companion if he had. So, after pounding long on the door, a drowsy voice demanded, with many and vivid expletives, who was there, and then added:

"Oh, it's you, Jasper; what in the name of thunder are you making all that row about? And what are you doing waking up a man this time o' night! Hold on! You're an obstinate man, and I guess you'll bust my door unless I let you in."

The speaker did so, and when he had ushered us into a long bare room with a stove still twinkling in the midst of it, he explained that his subordinates would not serve an ambassador before the regulation breakfast hour, and lighting a kerosene lamp immediately withdrew. Jasper, however, took it all as a matter of course, and when, rolled in his long coat, he stretched himself on a settee and went to sleep, I followed suit. Still they gave us a good breakfast – porridge, steak, potatoes, corn-cakes and molasses – at which I wondered, because I had not discovered as yet that there is no difference on the prairie between any of the three meals of the day.

When it was finished, my companion, who gave me directions as to how to find Coombs' homestead, added:

"Remember what I told you about harvest, and, if you strike nothing better, when the wheat is ripe come straight back to me. I'm Long Jasper of Willow Creek, and every one knows me. I like your looks, and I'll give you double whatever Coombs pays you. Guess he'll have taught you something, and I'm not speculating much when I stake on that. You'll fetch Jackson's crossing on the flat; go in and borrow a horse from him. Tell him Jasper sent you. Your baggage? When the station agent feels energetic he'll dump it into his shed, but I guess there's nothing that would hurry him until he does. Now strike out; it's only thirty miles, and if you go on as you've begun you'll soon feel at home in this great country!"

I thanked him sincerely and departed; and, as I passed the station, I saw that the agent evidently had not felt energetic yet, for my two boxes lay just where they had been flung out beside the track. As a preliminary experience it was all somewhat daunting, and the country forbidding, raw, even more unfinished than smoke-blackened Lancashire, and very cold; but I had found that every one seemed contented, and many of them proud of that new land, and I could see no reason why I too should not grow fond of it. At least I had not seen a hungry or a ragged person since I landed in Canada. Besides, Carrington Manor was less than fifty miles away, though it was evident now that a great gulf lay between Ralph Lorimer, the emigrant seeking an opportunity to learn his business as farm-servant, and the heiress of Carrington.

CHAPTER IV

AN UNPLEASANT APPRENTICESHIP

By this time the sun was high, and, fastening the skin coat round my shoulders with a piece of string, I trudged on, rejoicing in the first warmth and brightness I had so far found in Canada. But it had its disadvantages, for the snow became unpleasantly soft, and it was a relief to find that the breeze had stripped the much thinner covering from the first of the swelling rises that rolled back toward the north. Here I halted a few minutes and surveyed my adopted country.

Behind lay the roofs of Elktrail, some of them tin-covered and flashing like a heliograph; in front a desolate wilderness where the gray-white of frost-bleached grasses was streaked by the incandescent brightness of sloppy snow. There was neither smoke nor sign of human presence in all its borders – only a few dusky patches of willows to break the vast monotony of white and blue. And somewhere out on those endless levels, thirty miles to the north, lay the homestead of the man who might not give me employment even if I could find the place, which, remembering Jasper's directions, seemed by no means certain. However, the first landmark at least was visible, a sinuous line of dwarfed trees low down on the horizon; and gathering my sinking courage I struck out for it. Slowly the miles were left behind – straggling copse, white plateau, and winding ravine – until it was a relief to find an erection of sod and birch-poles nestling in a hollow. The man who greeted me in the doorway was bronzed to coffee color by the sun-blink on snow, and his first words were: "Walk right in, and make yourself at home!"

He was thin, hard, and wiry; the gray slouch hat and tattered deerskin jacket became him; while, if he had not the solidity of our field laborers, he evidently had nothing of their slowness, and with natural curiosity I surveyed him. There were many in Lancashire and Yorkshire who might beat him at a heavy lift, but few who could do so in a steady race against time from dawn to dusk, I thought. Then somewhat awkwardly I explained my business, and, mentioning Jasper, asked if he would lend me a horse, whereupon he called to the cheerful, neatly-dressed woman bustling about the stove:

"Hurry on that dinner, Jess!"

Next, turning to me, he added: "You're welcome to the horse, but it will be supper-time before you fetch Coombs' homestead, and you mayn't get much then. So lie right back where you are until dinner's ready, and tell us the best news of the Old Country. Jess was born there."

It was characteristic treatment, and though the meal was frugal – potatoes, pork, green tea, flapjacks and drips, which is probably glucose flavored with essences – they gave me of their best, as even the poorest settlers do. One might travel the wide world over to find their equal in kindly hospitality. Perhaps the woman noticed my bashfulness, for she laughed as she said:

"You're very welcome to anything we have. New out from England, I see, and maybe we're rough to look at. Still, you'll learn to like us presently."

In this, however, she was wrong. They were not rough to look at, for though it was plain to see that both toiled hard for a bare living there was a light-hearted contentment about them, and a curious something that seemed akin to refinement. It was not educational polish, but rather a natural courtesy and self-respect, though the words do not adequately express it, which seems born of freedom, and an instinctive realization of the brotherhood of man expressed in kindly action. Hard-handed and weather-beaten, younger son of good English family or plowman born, as I was afterward to find, the breakers of the prairie are rarely barbaric in manners or speech, and, in the sense of its inner meaning, most of them are essentially gentlemen.

It was with a lighter heart and many good wishes that I rode out again, and eventually reached Coombs' homestead, where a welcome of a different kind awaited me. The house was well built of sawn lumber, and backed by a thin birch bluff, while there was no difficulty in setting down its owner

as an Englishman of a kind that fortunately is not common. He was stout and flabby in face, with a smug, self-satisfied air I did not like. Leaning against a paddock rail, he looked me over while I told him what had brought me there. Then he said, with no trace of Western accent, which, it afterward appeared, he affected to despise:

“You should not have borrowed that horse, because if we come to terms I shall have to feed him a day or two. Of course you would be useless for several months at least, and with the last one I got a premium. However, as a favor I’ll take you until after harvest for your board.”

“What are the duties?” I asked cautiously. And he answered:

“Rise at dawn, feed the working cattle, and plow until the dinner-hour – when you learn how. Then you could water the stock while you’re resting; plow, harrow, or chop wood until supper; after that, wash up supper dishes, and – it’s standing order – attend family prayers. In summer you’ll continue hay cutting until it’s dark.”

Now the inhabitants of eastern Lancashire and the West Riding are seldom born foolish, and Jasper had cautioned me. So it may have been native shrewdness that led to my leaving the draft for one hundred pounds intact at the Winnipeg office of the Bank of Montreal and determining to earn experience and a living at the same time as promptly as possible. Also, though I did not discover it until later, this is the one safe procedure for the would-be colonist. There is not the slightest reason why he should pay a premium, because the work is the same in either case; and as, there being no caste distinction, all men are equal, hired hand and farmer living and eating together, he will find no difference in the treatment. In any case, I had no intention of working for nothing, and answered shortly:

“I’ll come for ten dollars a month until harvest. I shall no doubt find some one to give me twenty then.”

Coombs stared, surveyed me ironically from head to heel again, and, after offering five dollars, said very reluctantly:

“Seven-fifty, and it’s sinful extravagance. Put the horse in that stable and don’t give him too much chop. Then carry in those stove billets, and see if Mrs. Coombs wants anything to get supper ready.”

I was tired and sleepy; but Coombs evidently intended to get the value of his seven-fifty out of me – he had a way of exacting the utmost farthing – and after feeding the horse, liberally, I carried fourteen buckets of water to fill a tank from the well before at last supper was ready. We ate it together silently in a long match-boarded room – Coombs, his wife, Marvin the big Manitoban hired man, and a curly-haired brown-eyed stripling with a look of good breeding about him. Mrs. Coombs was thin and angular, with a pink-tipped nose; and in their dwelling – the only place I ever saw it on the prairie – she and her husband always sat with several feet of blank table between themselves and those who worked for them. They were also, I thought, representatives of an unpleasant type – the petty professional or suddenly promoted clerk, who, lacking equally the operative’s sturdiness and the polish of those born in a higher station, apes the latter, and, sacrificing everything for appearance, becomes a poor burlesque on humanity. Even here, on the lone, wide prairie, they could not shake off the small pretense of superiority. When supper was finished – and Coombs’ suppers were the worst I ever ate in Canada – the working contingent adjourned after washing dishes to the sod stable, where I asked questions about our employer.

“Meaner than pizon!” said Marvin. “Down East, on the ’lantic shore, is where he ought to be. Guess he wore them out in the old country, and so they sent him here.”

Then the young lad stretched out his hand with frank good-nature. “I’m Harry Lorraine, premium pupil on this most delectable homestead. You’re clearly fresh out from England, and I’m sure we’ll be good friends,” he said. “Coombs? Well, Jim Marvin is right. I’ve set him down in my own mind as a defaulting deacon, or something of the kind. Did my guardian out of a hundred and fifty as premium, with duck, brant-goose, and prairie-chicken shooting thrown in – and he sees I’ve

never time to touch a gun. However, I'm learning the business; and in spite of his quite superfluous piety he can farm, in a get-all-you-can-for-nothing kind of way."

"He can't, just because of that same," broke in the prairie-born. "I'm sick of this talking religion, but you'll see it written plain on furrow and stock that when the Almighty gives the good soil freely He expects something back, and not a stinting of dumb beasts and land to roll up money in the bank. Take all and give nothing don't pan out worth the washing, and that man will get let down of a sudden some cold day. Hallo! here's the blamed old reprobate coming."

Coombs slid through the stable with a cat-like gait and little eyes that noticed everything, while Harry leaned against a stall defiantly sucking at his pipe, and I wondered whether I was expected to be working at something.

"Idleness does not pay in this country, Lorimer," he said, with a beatific air. "Diligence is the one road to success. There is a truss of hay waiting to go through the cutter. Harry, I notice more oats than need be mixed with that chop."

He went out, and Harry laughed as he said, "Always the same! Weighs out the week's sugar to the teaspoonful. But you look tired. If you feed I'll work the infernal chopper."

So for a time I fed in the hay, while Harry swung up and down at the wheel, slender and debonair in spite of his coarse blue garments, with merry brown eyes. He was younger than I, and evidently inferior in muscle; but, as I know now, he had inherited a spirit which is greater than mere bodily strength. No man had a truer comrade than I in Harry Lorraine, and the friendship which commenced in the sod stable that night when I was travel-worn and he cut the hay for me will last while we two remain on this earth, and after, hallowed in the survivor's memory, until – but, remembering Coombs, I know that silence is often reverence, and so leave Grace's clean lips to voice the eternal hope.

We went back for family prayers, when Coombs read a chapter of Scripture; and he read passably well, though, for some reason, his tone jarred on me, while Harry fidgeted uneasily. Now I think it would jar even more forcibly. A hard life face to face with wild nature, among fearless, honest men, either by land or sea, induces, among other things, a becoming humility. There are times, out on the vast prairie, when, through glories of pearl and crimson, night melts into day, or up in the northern muskies, where the great Aurora blazes down through the bitter frost, when one stands, as it were, abashed and awe-stricken under a dim perception of the majesty upholding this universe. Then, and because of this, the man with understanding eyes will never be deceived by complacent harangues on sacred things from such as Coombs who never lend a luckless neighbor seed-wheat, and oppress the hireling. Much better seemed Jasper's answer when Harry once asked him for twenty acres' seed: "Take half that's in the granary, if you want it. Damnation! why didn't you come before?"

We retired early, Harry and I, to sleep in the same room, with the rusty stove-pipe running through it; and we rose, I think, at four o'clock; while an hour later the feet of the big plow-oxen were trampling the rich loam where the frost had mellowed the fall back-setting. We worked until nine that night, and I had words with Coombs when he gave me directions about plowing. We do not get our land for nothing in Lancashire, and so learn to work the utmost out of every foot of it. However, I do not purpose to dilate upon either disc-harrows or breaking prairie, nor even the cutting of wild hay – which harsh and wiry product is excellent feeding – for all these matters will be mentioned again. Still, as spring and summer rolled away, I gathered experience that saved me a good deal of money, and I felt at least an inch less round the waist and another broader round the shoulders.

Then one Saturday evening, when the northwest blazed with orange and saffron flame, I lay among the tussocks of whispering grass reading for the third or fourth time a few well-worn letters from Cousin Alice. Acre by acre the tall wheat, changing from green to ochre, rippled before me; and, had its owner's hand been more open, it would have been a splendid crop. Marvin, Harry, and I had plowed for and sown it, because Coombs despised manual labor, and confined himself chiefly to fault-finding. It struck me that if we could do this for another we could do even more for ourselves.

My agreement expired at harvest, and already the first oats were yellowing. Coombs' voice roused me from a pleasant reverie, wherein I sat once more with Alice beside the hearth in England.

"It's not dark yet, and there's the wire waiting for the paddock fence," he said. "I regret to see you addicted to loafing. And Mrs. Coombs has no water left for the kitchen."

Saying nothing, I smiled a little bitterly as I marched away to carry in water, and then the lady, whose thin face seemed sourer than usual that evening, set me to wash the supper dishes. All went well until I had the misfortune to break a stove-cracked plate, when looking at me contemptuously she said:

"How very clumsy! Do you know you have cost me two dollars already by your breakages? No – the handle always toward a lady! But what could be expected? You were never brought up."

Now the frying-pan or spider I held out had stood with its handle over an open lid of the range, so, though nettled, I still held it turned from her, and answered shortly:

"Not to wash dishes, madam, though my up-bringing has nothing to do with the case."

With an impatient gesture she reached over and grasped the hot handle, then dropped it with a cry just as the door opened and Coombs came in. This did not displease me, for if a quarrel must come it comes best quickly, and I listened unmoved while the mistress of the homestead said:

"Walter, I think you had better get rid of this man. He not only breaks my crockery, but set a cruel trap to burn my fingers, and I do not choose to be insulted by a hired hand."

"Have you anything to say before I turn you out on the prairie?" asked Coombs pompously; and remembering many an old grievance I answered with cheerful readiness:

"Nothing of much moment, beyond that I warned Mrs. Coombs, and it was an accident. But it is cooler without, and we can discuss it better there."

He followed in evident surprise, and I chuckled when he even walked after me into the stable, for already I guessed that if I left before the harvest I might have trouble about my wages. So far, in spite of several requests, Coombs had paid me nothing. It is also possible that a penniless newcomer of peaceful disposition might have been victimized, but I had learned in several industrial disputes, argued out with clog and brickbat as well as upon barrelhead platforms, that there are occasions when ethical justice may well be assisted by physical force. Besides, I was a Lingdale Lorimer, and would have faced annihilation rather than let any man rob me of my right.

"I am afraid Mrs. Coombs is prejudiced against me, and it might save unpleasantness if you paid me my wages and I left this place to-night," I said; and read in Coombs' face that this was by no means what he desired. Wages are high at harvest and labor scarce, while any one with a knowledge of working land was a god-send at seven dollars a month. But Coombs was equal to the emergency.

"I regret to see so much dishonesty in one so young," he said. "Our bargain was until after harvest, and I'll neither pay you a dollar nor give up your boxes if you go before. Let this be a lesson, if I overlook it, to confine yourself to the truth."

I forget what I answered – we were always a hot-blooded race – but I fancy that several adjectives and the word hypocrite figured therein; while Coombs, shaken out of his usual assumption of ironical courtesy, made a serious mistake when he tried bullying. As he strode toward me, fuming like an irate turkey cock, in an absurdly helpless attitude, I grasped his shoulder and backed him violently against a stall. Then, and whether this was justifiable I do not know, though I know that otherwise not a cent would I ever have got, I took out his wallet, which, as he had been selling stock in Brandon, contained a roll of dollar bills, and counted out the covenanted hire.

"Now I'm going to borrow your spare horse to carry my box," I said. "It will be sent back from Jasper's to-morrow, and if you venture to interfere I shall be compelled to hurt you. Let this also be a lesson to you – never try to bluff an angry man and put your hands up like that."

I think he swore, I am sure he groaned distressfully when I went out with what was due to me. Meeting Harry I told him the story.

“I don’t think my guardians care much about me, and I’m coming with you,” he said. “Good evening, Mrs. Coombs, you may make dusters of any old clothes I leave. I am going away with Mr. Lorimer, and henceforward I am afraid you will have to trust Marvin, who’ll certainly eat the sugar, or do your own plate washing.”

So twenty minutes later, while Marvin stood chuckling on the threshold and waved his hat to us, we marched out in triumph, leading Coombs’ steed which made an efficient pack-horse. It was dawn the next day when aching and footsore we limped into Jasper’s. He lay back in his hide chair laughing until there were tears in his eyes when we told him the tale at breakfast, then smote me on the back as he said:

“I’d have given a good deal to see it – the cunning old rascal! Got your full wages out of him? – well, I guess you broke the record. What shall you do now? – stay right where you are. It’s a bonanza harvest, and I’ll keep my promise; fifteen dollars a month, isn’t it? Mr. Lorraine! oh yes, I know him – offer you the same. Then when harvest’s over we’ll talk again.”

Needless to say, we gladly accepted the offer.

CHAPTER V

A BID FOR FORTUNE

We returned the horse with a note of sarcastic thanks, and flattered ourselves that we had heard the last of the matter. Several days later, however, when, grimed with oil and rust, I was overhauling a binder, a weather-beaten man wearing a serviceable cavalry uniform rode in, and explaining that he was a sergeant of the Northwest Police added that he had come in the first case to investigate a charge of assault and robbery brought against one Ralph Lorimer by Coombs. I told him as clearly as I could just what had happened, and I fancied that his face relaxed, while his eyes twinkled suspiciously as he patted the fidgeting horse, which did not like the binder.

Then sitting rigidly erect, the same man who afterward rode through an ambush of cattle-stealing rustlers who were determined to kill him, he said, "I'm thinking ye acted imprudently – maist imprudently, but I'm not saying ye could have got your wages otherwise oot o' Coombs. Weel, I'll take Jasper's security for it that ye'll be here, and away back to report to my superior. Don't think ye'll be wanted at Regina, Mr. Lorimer. Good-morning til ye, Jasper."

"Get down, Sergeant Angus," said Jasper, grasping his rein. "If you have run all decent whiskey off the face of the prairie, I've still got some hard cider to offer you. Say, don't you think you had better ride round and lock up that blamed old Coombs?"

There was less hard cider in the homestead when Sergeant Angus Macfarlane rode out again, and our presence was never requested by the Northwest Police. Nevertheless, it became evident that either Coombs or his wife was of inquiring as well as revengeful disposition, and had read some of the letters I left about, for some time later, when the snowdrifts raced across the prairie I received the following epistle from Martin Lorimer:

"I return the last letter sent your cousin, and until the present cloud is lifted from your name I must forbid your writing her. Neither do I desire any more communications from you. We all have our failings, and there is much I could have forgiven you, but that you should have used your position in the mill to ruin that foolish girl Minnie Lee is more than I can overlook. The story has roused a very bitter feeling, even among my own hands, who are not particularly virtuous, and now that we are on the eve of the elections some of the other side's pettifoggers are using it freely. Still, I should gladly have faced all that, but for my own shame, knowing it is true. Her father is a half-mad religious fanatic of some sort; he came in to call down vengeance upon me, and I laughed at him, as I insulted the first man who told me, for his trouble. Then I remembered how by chance I once heard her arrange to meet you in Winnipeg. I understand the father is going out especially to look for you, and you had better beware of him. Further, I have a letter from a man called Coombs who brings a charge of robbery against you, saying it appeared his duty to advise me. This I returned endorsed, 'A lie,' because none of the Lingdale Lorimers ever stole anything back to the time of Hilary, who was hanged like a Jacobite gentleman for taking despatches sword in hand from two of Cumberland's dragoons. If you are ever actually in want you can let me know. If not, I am sorry to say it, I do not wish to hear from you."

Hot with rage I flung down the letter, and, though how it got there never transpired, a tiny slip of paper fluttered out from it, on which I read the words, "There is a shameful story told about you, Ralph, but even in spite of my dislike at mentioning it I must tell you that I do not believe a word of it. Go on, trust in a clean conscience, and the truth will all come out some day."

"God bless her for her sweet charity," I said; then sat staring moodily across the frozen prairie until Harry touched me on the arm.

"I hope you have no bad news from home," he said.

I have suffered at times from speaking too frankly, but I had full trust in Harry, and told him all, adding as I held out the letter:

“He ought to know me better; it’s cruel and unjust. I’ll write by the next mail to Winnipeg and send back the confounded money he gave me when I came out. Read that!”

Harry did so leisurely, wrinkling his brows; then he said: “I think I sympathize with your uncle – no, wait a little. That letter was written by a man who would much more gladly have defended you – you can recognize regret running through every line of it – forced to believe against his wish by apparently conclusive evidence. Otherwise, he would have ended with the first sentences. I should like him from this letter, and should be pleased to meet your cousin. In any case, apart from the discourtesy, you can’t send the money back; from what you told me you are not certain even that it was a present. Better write and explain the whole thing, then if he doesn’t answer leave it to time.”

I can still see Harry standing wrapped in his long fur coat looking down at me with kindly eyes. In due time I learned that he gave me very good counsel, though it was much against my wishes that I followed it.

We worked hard for Jasper that harvest from the clear cold dawning until long after the broad red moon swung up above the prairie. Day by day the tinkling knives of the binders rasped through the flinty stems, and the tossing wooden arms caught up the tall wheat that went down before them and piled it in golden sheaves upon the prairie. This one machine has done great things for the Western Dominion, for without it when wheat is cheap and labor dear many a crop that would not pay for the cutting would rot where it grew. Jasper, however, possessed one of the antiquated kind which bound the sheaves with wire, and occasionally led to wild language when a length of springy steel got mixed up with the thrasher. Every joint and sinew ached, there were times when we were almost too tired to sleep, but – and this was never the case with Coombs – wherever the work was hardest the master of the homestead did two men’s share, and his cheery encouragement put heart into the rest.

Then, drawn by many sturdy oxen, the big thrasher rolled in, and the pace grew faster still. The engine, like others in use thereabout, shed steam and hot water round it from every leaky joint, and kept Harry busy feeding it with birch billets and liquid from the well. There were sheaves to pitch to the separator, grain bags to be filled and hauled to the straw-pile granary, while between times we drove wagon-loads of chaff and straw bouncing behind the bronco teams to complete that altogether western structure. Its erection is simple. You drive stout birch poles into the sod, wattle them with willow branches, and lash on whatever comes handiest for rafters; then pile the straw all over it several fathoms thick, and leave the wind and snow to do the rest. When it has settled into shape and solidity it is both frost and rain proof, and often requires a hay-knife to get into it.

So, under a blue cloud of wood smoke, and amid blinding fibrous dust, panting men, jolting wagons, and the musical whir of the separator, the work went on, until the thrashers departed, taking their pay with them. Then, in the light box-wagons which first rolled across the uneven prairie on groaning wheels, and then slid in swift silence on runners over the snow, we hauled the grain to the railroad forty miles away. It was done at last, and Harry and I sat by the stove one bitter night considering our next move, when Jasper came in shaking the white crystals from his furs. He saw we were plotting something, and laughed as he said:

“Making up your bill? We’ll square it at the fifteen dollars to the day you hauled in the last load. Now I heard you talking of taking up land, and I’ve been thinking some. Nothing to earn a dollar at before the spring, and it will cost you considerable to board at Regina or Brandon. Is there anything the matter with stopping here? If you are particular we’ll make it a deal and cut in three the grocery bill. Meantime you can chop building lumber ready to start your house in spring. No, it isn’t any favor; I’ll be mighty glad of your company.”

It was a frank offer; we accepted it as frankly, and lived like three brothers while the prairie lay white and silent month after month under the Arctic frost. Also we found that a young Englishman who lived twenty miles to the west was anxious to dispose of his homestead and one hundred and

sixty acres of partly broken land at a bargain. We rode over to make inquiries, and learned that he had lost several successive crops. Jasper, however, said this was because he spent most of his time in shooting, while the man who wished to succeed in that region must start his work in grim earnest and stay right with it. Now he was going out to a berth in India, and would take the equivalent of four hundred pounds sterling for the buildings and land, with the implements and a team of oxen thrown in – at least one hundred and fifty pounds down, and the rest to run at eight per cent. on mortgage. It was dirt cheap at the money, but there was no one to buy it, he said, and Jasper, who acted as our adviser, agreed with this.

“Got to make a plunge some time, and risking nothin’ you never win,” he said. “Figuring all round, it will fit you better than breaking virgin prairie, and you’ll pay a pile of that mortgage off if you get a good crop next fall. Then one of you can take up the next quarter-section free land. More working beasts? I’ll trade you my kicking third team at a valuation, and you can pay me after harvest. If the crop fails? Well, I’ll take my chances.”

We spent one night in calculations beside the glowing stove while the shingles crackled above us under the bitter cold, and found that by staking everything we could just manage it.

“I dare say I could raise a last hundred from my admiring relatives by hinting that without it I had serious thoughts of returning home,” said Harry. “I don’t know why, but they’re particularly anxious to keep me away.”

There was a ring of bitterness in his tone, and when in due time Harry got money he did not seem by any means grateful for it. It was long afterward before he told me much about his affairs, and even then I did not understand them fully, though it seemed probable that somebody had robbed him of his patrimony. Nobody, however, troubles about his comrade’s antecedents in the West, where many men have a somewhat vivid history. The new land accepts them for what they are in the present, leaving the past to the mother country. So a bargain was made, and the vendor received his first instalments; and as that winter sped I looked forward, half-fearful, half-exultant, to what the coming year should bring. Our feet at least were set on the long road which leads to success, and it was well that we could not see the flints and thorns that should wound them cruelly.

It was a clear spring morning, one of those mornings which on the wide grass-lands fill one’s heart with hope and stir the frost-chilled blood, when Harry and I stood beside our teams ready to drive the first furrow. A warm breeze from the Pacific, crossing the snow-barred Rockies, set the dry grasses rippling; and the prairie running northward league after league was dappled with moving shadow by the white cloudlets that scudded across the great vault of blue. Behind us straggling silver-stemmed birches sheltered the little log-house of Fairmead, which nestled snugly among them, with its low sod-built stable further among the slender branches behind. Trees are scarce in that region, and the settlers make the most of them. The white prairie was broken by a space of ashes and black loam, with a fire still crackling in crimson tongues among the stubble at the further end of it. Straw is worth nothing there, so a little is cut with the ear, and the rest burned off in spring, while the grasses growing and rotting for countless centuries have added to the rich alluvial left by some inland sea which covered all the prairie when the world was young. Nature, as those who love her know, is never in a hurry, and very slowly, little by little, working on through forgotten ages, she had stored her latent wealth under the matted sod against the time when the plowshare should convert it into food for man and beast. There is no wheat soil on the surface of the earth to beat that of Assiniboia and Manitoba.

Harry leaned on the plow-stilts with a smile on his handsome sun-bronzed face, and I smiled at him, for we were young and hope was strong within us.

“Ralph, I feel a hankering after some old heathen ceremonial, a pouring of wine upon it, or a garlanded priest to bless the fruitful earth,” he said, “but we put our trust in science and automatic binders now, and disregard the powers of infinity until they smite the crop down with devastating hail. Well, here’s the first stroke for fortune. Get up! Aw there, Stonewall!”

He tapped the big red ox with a pointed stick, the two beasts settled their massive shoulders to the collar, and with a soft greasy swish and a crackle of half-burnt stubble the moldboard rolled aside the loam. I too felt that this was a great occasion. At last I was working my own land; with the plowshare I was opening the gate of an unknown future; and my fingers tingled as I jerked the lines. Then while the coulter sheared its guiding line, and the trampling of hoofs mingled with the soft curl of clods, they seemed by some trick of memory to hammer out words I had last heard far away in the little weathered church under Starcross Moor, "And preserve to our use the kindly fruits of the earth so as in due time we may enjoy them."

There was a two-hours' rest at noonday, when we fared frugally on fried potatoes and the usual reistit pork, while Harry's oxen waded deep into a sloo, which is a lake formed by melting snow. Neither would they come out for either threats or blandishments until he went in too, with a pike; while Jasper's broncos, which were considerably less than half-tamed, backed round and round in rings when I attempted to re-harness them. Still, with laughter and banter we started again, and worked on until daylight faded and the stars twinkled out one by one above the dewy prairie. The scent of wild peppermint hung heavy in the cool air, which came out of the north exhilarating like wine, while the birch twigs sang strange songs to us as we drove the teams to the stable through the litter of withered leaves. An hour's work followed before we had made all straight there, and it was with a proud feeling of possession that at last I patted the neck of one of the horses, while the nervous creature looking up at me with understanding eyes rubbed its head against my shoulder.

When the stove was lighted we drank green tea and ate more flapjacks which Harry had badly burned. I remember that when he handed me the first cup he said, "We haven't got champagne, and we don't want whiskey, but this is a great day for both of us. Well, here's luck to the plowing and increase to the seed, and, whether it's success or failure, what we have started we'll see through together!"

Half ashamed of display of sentiment, I clinked the cracked cup against his own, and Harry leaned forward toward me with a smile that could not hide the light of youthful enthusiasm in his eyes, graceful, in spite of the mold of the plowing on his fretted garments. Then he choked and spluttered, for the hot fluid scalded him, and a roar of laughter saved the situation. Made as it was over a cup of very smoky tea, that compact was carried out faithfully under parching heat and bitter cold, in the biting dust of alkali and under the silence of the primeval bush. For an hour we lounged smoking and chatting in ox-hide chairs, watching the red glow from the range door flicker upon the guns and axes on the wall, or the moonlight broaden across the silent grass outside each time it faded, until the mournful coyotes began to wail along the rim of the prairie and we crawled up a ladder into the little upper room, where in ten minutes we were fast asleep on hard wooden couches covered with skins. I remember that just before I sank into oblivion a vision of a half-mile length of golden wheat floated before my heavy eyes, with Grace Carrington standing, sickle in hand, beside it. Her dress was of the color of the ear-bent stems, her eyes as the clear ether above, and the sickle was brighter than any crescent moon. Then it all changed. Powdery snow eddied through the withered stubble, and, against a background of somber firs that loomed above it, there was only the tall forbidding figure of Colonel Carrington. Afterward I often remembered that dream.

CHAPTER VI

THE FIRST CROP

Each day brought much the same tasks at Fairmead until the disc-harrows had rent up the clods, and with a seeder borrowed from a neighbor ten miles away we drilled in the grain. While we worked the air above us was filled with the beat of wings, as in skeins, wedges, and crescents the wild fowl, varying from the tiny butter-duck to the brant goose and stately crane, went by on their long journey from the bayous by the sunny gulf to the newly thawed tundra mosses beside the Polar Sea. Legion by legion they came up from the south and passed, though some folded their weary pinions to rest on the way, and for a few short weeks every sloo was dotted with their plumage. Then they went on, and we knew we should see no more of them until the first blasts of winter brought them south again. All this appealed to our sporting instincts, but time was precious then, and though I glanced longingly at Harry's double-barrel, I did not lift it from the wall. Every moment had its duties, and the thought of the mortgage held us to our task.

Then there followed an interlude of building and well-digging, when we sank down some thirty feet or so, and rammed the shaft sides with nigger-head stones, while occasionally some of our scattered neighbors rode twenty miles to lend us assistance. Meantime, a tender flush of emerald crept across the crackling sod, and the birches unfolded their tiny leaves until the bluff shimmered with tender verdure silver inlaid, while the jack-rabbits, which had not as yet wholly put off their winter robes of ermine, scurried, piebald and mottled, through its shadows. Then, while the wheat grew taller, and the air warmer every day, the prairie assumed an evanescent beauty which it presently put off again, for the flush faded from the grasses, and only the birch bluff remained for a refuge filled with cool neutral shadow in a sun-parched land. It was now time for the hay cutting, and we drove the rusty mower here and there across the dazzling plain, upon which willow grove and bluff stood cut off from the levels beneath by glancing vapor, like islands rising out of a shimmering sea. On much of it the grasses grew only to a few inches in length, and we had therefore to seek winter food for our beasts in each dried-up sloo, where they stood sometimes waist-high and even higher. No making was needed; the sun already had done that better than we could, and we merely drove the mower through, after which I went back with the loaded wagon, while Harry rode further out on to the prairie in search of another sloo.

The mosquitoes came down in legions and bit us grievously, until it was necessary to anoint our hair with kerosene. Our dwelling was stifling, so that as a matter of necessity we always cooked outside; but the temperature changed at sundown, and, lying full length on the peppermint-scented hay, we rode home content across the darkening prairie, which faded under the starlight into the semblance of a limitless dusky sea, while the very stillness voiced its own message of infinity. Neither of us would speak at such times. Harry had a turn for emotional sentiment, I knew, but I too could feel that it was good to lie there motionless and silent, and try to grasp its meaning. Then the strained sense of expectancy would fade at the sight of the approaching homestead, or a bronco blundering into a badger-hole would call us back to a work-a-day world.

Harvest came, and that year there was neither drought nor untimely frost, and our hearts grew light when the binders piled up a splendid crop. Still, when we proposed to prepare a thanksgiving feast for all our neighbors, Jasper, who had ridden over, grinned as he said, "Better lie low and pay off that mortgage. You're only starting, and they wouldn't expect it of you. Besides, you'll have had your fill of cooking before you have finished with the thrashers."

This proved correct enough, for when the men came in with the thrasher and the homestead vibrated to its hum, others whose harvests were garnered came too, out of good-will, and Harry was cooking and baking all day long. Sometimes for hours together they kept me busy beheading and

plucking fowls – we turned a steam jet on them from the engine to make the feathers come off; and it amused me to wonder what Alice would think if she saw me sitting, flecked all over with down, among the feathers, or Harry standing grimed with dust and soot, peeling potatoes by the bucketful beside his field kitchen. When the thrashers departed our larder and our henhouse were empty, and the grocery bill long; but we were only sorry that we could not entertain them more royally, for the men who worked for money at so much the bushel and the men who worked for friendship vied with one another in their labor, and there was no one among them but rejoiced at our success.

Wheat was in good demand at remunerative prices that year, and I remember the day we hauled the last load to the elevators. Winter had set in early, and wrapped in long skin coats we tramped beside the wagons across the waste of crackling sod, while the steam from the horses rose like smoke into the nipping air. We started long before the wondrous green and crimson dawn, for it was nearly a twelve hours' journey to the railway town. We reached it finally, after a tiresome ride; and then for two hours we waited shivering among kicking and biting teams under the gaunt elevators before we could haul in our wagons, and for perhaps fifteen minutes there was a great whirring of wheels. Then they were drawn forth empty, and presently we came out of the office with sundry signed papers readily convertible into coin at Winnipeg, and marched exultant to the hotel, scarcely feeling the frozen earth beneath us in spite of our weariness. No spirituous liquor might be sold there, but for once we meant to enjoy an ample meal which we had not cooked ourselves, served on clean plates and a real white tablecloth.

It was a simple banquet, but we felt like feasting kings, and though since then we have both sat at meat among railroad magnates, deputations from Ottawa, and others great in the land, we never enjoyed one like it. Harry, forgetting he was in Western Canada, tried to slip a silver half-dollar into the waitress' hand, who dropped it on the floor, perhaps because in that region wages are such that the hireling is neither dependent on nor looks for a stranger's generosity. I stooped to raise the coin and hand it her, and then started as for the first time our eyes met, while a wave of color suffused the face of the girl who stepped backward, for it was Minnie Lee.

"Harry," I said, stretching out my hand to her. "This is the lady I told you about. You remember the letter. Now go along, and settle matters with the proprietor. Sit down, Minnie, I want to talk to you. Tell me how you came here, and why you left England, won't you?"

The girl had lost her pink-and-white prettiness. Her face was pale, and she was thinner than before, while there was a hard, defiant look in her eyes. Besides, she seemed ill at ease and startled when I drew out a chair for her, and I too was singularly ill at ease. We had the long room to ourselves, however, for on the prairie meals are served at a definite hour, and usually despatched in ten minutes or so. Few men there waste time lounging over the table.

"I hardly knew you, Ralph – you have changed so much," she said, and I only nodded, for I was impatient to hear her story; and she had surely changed far more than I. The Minnie I used to know was characterized by a love of mischief and childish vanity, but the present one wore rather the air of a woman with some knowledge of life's tragedy.

"It's almost an old story now," she said bitterly. "Father had a craze for religion, mother was always sighing, and there was no peace at home for me. Then I met Tom Fletcher again – you remember him – and when he took me to concerts and dances I felt at last that I had begun to live. The endless drudgery in the mill, the little house in the smoky street, and the weary chapel three times each Sunday, were crushing the life out of me. You understand – you once told me you felt it all, and you went out in search of fortune; but what can a woman do? Still, I dare not tell father. All gaiety was an invention of the devil, according to him. We were married before the registrar – Tom had reasons. I cannot tell you them; but we were married," and she held up a thin finger adorned by a wedding-ring.

I remembered Fletcher as a good-looking clerk with a taste for betting and fanciful dress, who had been discharged from the Orb mill for inattention to his duties, and I wondered that Minnie should have chosen him from among her many other admirers of more sterling character.

"I said nothing to any one," she continued. "Tom was disappointed about something on which he had counted. He'd got into trouble over his accounts, too. There had been a scene with father, who said I was a child of the devil, and when Tom told me there was false accusation against him, and nobody must know we were going, we slipped away quietly. I was too angered to write to father, and it might have put the police on Tom. Tom was innocent, he said. We had very little money, work was hardly to be had – and our child died soon after we settled in Winnipeg."

"Go on," I said gently, and she clenched her hands with a gesture that expressed fierce resentment as well as sorrow as she added:

"The poor little innocent thing had no chance for its life – we were short of even bare necessities, for Tom could pick up only a few dollars now and then – and I think that all that was good in me died with it. So when he found work watching the heater of a store a few hours each night, and the wages would not keep two, I had to go out and earn my bread here – and I sometimes wish I had never been born."

I made no answer for a space. There was nothing I could say that might soften such trouble as was stamped on her face; although I remembered having heard Jasper say that a weight clerk was wanted at the new elevator further down the line. Then, blundering as usual, I said:

"Do you know, Minnie, they blame me at home for bringing you out here, and I heard that your father had sworn to be revenged upon me?"

There was sullen fury in the girl's eyes – she was very young after all – but she kept herself in hand, and answered bitterly:

"It was like their lying tongues. Envy and malice, and always some one's character to be taken away. No; it was Tom – and Tom, God help us both, has lost his head and drinks too much when he can. But I must not keep you, Ralph Lorimer, and henceforward you have nothing to do with me."

A voice called "Minnie," and I had only time to say, "Perhaps I can find some better work for him; and you will write home and tell them the truth for your own and my sake, won't you?" before she hurried away.

Then Harry and I walked down to the freight-siding, where the big box cars hauled out ready from under the elevators were waiting. Two huge locomotives were presently coupled on, there followed a clanging of bells, and we watched the twinkling tail-lights grow dimmer across the prairie. Part of our harvest, we knew, was on board that train, starting on the first stage of its long journey to fill with finest flour the many hungry mouths that were waiting for it in the old land we had left behind. The lights died out in a hollow far away on the prairie's rim, and Harry slipped his arm through mine, perhaps because his heart was full. With much anxiety, ceaseless toil, and the denying ourselves of every petty luxury, we had called that good grain forth from the prairie, and the sale of it meant at least one year free from care.

Before we turned away, straight as the crow flies a cavalcade came clattering up out of the silent prairie, while, after a jingle of harness, merry clear-pitched voices filled the station, and something within me stirred at the sound. There was no trace of Western accent here, though the prairie accent is rarely unpleasant, for these were riders from Carrington who spoke pure English, and were proud of it. Two, with a certain courtliness which also was foreign to that district, helped an elderly lady down from a light carriage luxuriously hung on springs, which must have been built specially at the cost of many dollars, and the rest led their well-groomed horses toward the store stables, or strolled beside the track jesting with one another. None of them wore the skin coats of the settlers. Some were robed in furs, and others in soft-lined deerskin, gaily fringed by Blackfoot squaws, which became them; but except for this they were of the British type most often met with gripping the hot double-

barrel when the pheasants sweep clattering athwart the wood, or sitting intent and eager with tight hand on the rein outside the fox cover.

Still, no one could say they had suffered by their translation to a new country, which was chiefly due to Colonel Carrington. He had been successful hitherto at wheat-growing on an extensive scale, and though few of the settlers liked him they could not help admiring the bold far-seeing way in which he speculated on the chances of the weather, or hedged against a risky wheat crop by purchasing western horses. Still, not content with building up the finest property thereabout, he aspired to rule over a British settlement, and each time that he visited the old country at regular intervals several young Englishmen of good family and apparently ample means returning with him commenced breaking virgin prairie. They were not all a success as farmers, the settlers said, and there were occasional rumors of revolt; but if they had their differences with the grim autocrat they kept them loyally to themselves, and never spoke in public of their leader save with respect. Now it was evident that his daughter was expected; they had come to escort her home in state, and no princess could have desired a finer bodyguard. They were the pick of the old country's well-born youth when they came out, and now they had grown to a splendid manhood in the wide spaces of the prairie.

Though they answered our greetings with good fellowship, I am afraid we regarded them a little enviously, for the value of some of their horses would have sown us a crop, and even Harry seemed unkempt beside them. We lived and dressed very plainly at Fairmead that year. Then amid a grinding of brakes, with lights flashing, a long train rolled in, and the group stood, fur cap in hand, about the platform of a car from which a dainty figure looked down at them. It was Grace Carrington, and as I stood a little apart from the rest my heart leaped at the sight of her. Yet, either from bashfulness or foolish pride, I would not move a step nearer.

"What a picture!" said Harry softly. "A princess of the prairie and her subjects doing homage to her! Ralph, I say, you must not stare at the girl like that. But, by Jove, she's smiling this way – yes, she is really beckoning you!"

It was true, for a stripling who wore his deerskin jacket as though it were the dolman of a cavalry officer strode forward, and inclining his head said:

"If you are Mr. Lorimer, Miss Carrington desires to speak with you."

For some reason I drew Harry with me. It may have been that I felt the company of a comrade of my own kind would be comforting in that assembly; and then I forgot everything as, fixing her bright eyes on me, Grace held out her hand.

"It was kind of you to meet me, and this is an unexpected pleasure," she said. "You must come over to Carrington and tell me where you have settled. Oh stay, Raymond, this is Mr. Lorimer – he was kind to me in England, and I want you to invite him to your approaching festivities. You will come, won't you, and bring your friend – very pleased to see you Mr. Lorraine, too; then I shall have an opportunity for talking with you."

"Delighted, of course, to please you," said a tall bronzed man of maturer years, bowing. "Met Mr. Lorimer already; pulled my wagon up most kindly when the team was stalled in a ravine. If I'd known you were from the old country would have ridden over already to ask you."

Further introductions followed, all effected in a queenly way, and with a last pleasant glance toward us Grace moved toward the carriage, while I fancied that some of the younger among her bodyguard regarded us jealously. Harry and I stood silent until the cavalcade vanished into the dimness, and then, while the last beat of hoofs died away, the blood surged through every artery as he said:

"Wasn't she splendid! When she held out her hand to me I felt that I ought to go down on one knee and kiss it, and all that kind of thing, you know. Ralph, you stalked up like a bear; must have been dazed by too much brightness, because you never even raised your hat. Well, one can understand it; but I think some of the others would have liked to cut your big solid throat for you."

Harry was both enthusiastic and impressionable, though I did not think so then, and the whole scene could scarcely have lasted five minutes, but it filled my mind for days afterward, and I can recall it clearly still.

CHAPTER VII

HARVEST HOME

It was a bitter night when Harry and I rode into the red glow of light that beat out through the windows of Lone Hollow, the furthest outlying farm of the Carrington group, where, now that the last bushel of his wheat had been sold in Winnipeg, Raymond Lyle was celebrating a bounteous harvest. Round about it, drawn up in ranks, stood vehicles – or rigs, as we call them – of every kind, for it seemed as if the whole country-side had driven in. Most of them were of better make than those we and the majority of the poorer settlers used, and it was hard not to covet when we managed to find a stall for our beasts.

When one has wasted precious time that in the whole season can scarcely be made up again, by riding behind oxen at the exhilarating pace of some two miles an hour, or hauling in grain with half-tamed horses which jib at every hill, it is easy to realize the advantages of an efficient team, and any of those we saw in the Lone Hollow stables would have saved us many dollars each year. Even in the West the poor man is handicapped from the beginning, and must trust to ready invention and lengthened hours of labor to make up for the shortcomings of indifferent tools.

Lyle, who had heard the trampling of hoofs, met us at the door. “It was kind of you to come, and I hope you will enjoy yourselves,” he said. “We have tried to make things homely, but, as you know, this isn’t England.”

We shook off our wrappings and entered the long lamp-lit hall, partly dazed by the sudden glare and warmth after the intense cold. It certainly was different from anything I had seen at home, for here in place of paint and gilding the decoration was in harmony with the country, bizarre and bountiful, with a beauty that was distinctly its own. Few oat-heads grown from English furrows might compare with the pale golden tassels that drooped in graceful festoons from the wall, while among the ruddier wheat-ears and bearded barley, antelope heads peeped out beside the great horns of caribou which the owner of Lone Hollow had shot in the muskegs of the north. Rifles and bright double-bitted axes of much the same pattern as those with which our forbears hewed through Norman mail caught the light of the polished brass lamps and flashed upon the wainscot, while even an odd cross-cut saw had been skillfully impressed into the scheme of ornamentation. But there was nothing pinchbeck or tawdry about them. Whirled high by sinewy hands, or clenched in hard brown fingers while a steady eye stared down the barrel, that a bridge might span a ravine where no bridge had been, or venison help to cut down the grocery bill and leave the more for the breaking of virgin soil, that steel had played its part in the opening up of a wide country. Yet, the suggestion of strict utility even enhanced its effectiveness, and I remembered with a smile the trophies of weapons stamped out by the gross in Birmingham which I had seen adorning our suburban villas at home.

The majority of the guests were English – one could see that at a glance, and the mother country had small reason to be ashamed of her outland sons. The clear skin showed through the snow-blink’s tan, and the eyes were bright with a steadfastness that comes from gazing into wide distance. Sun, wind, and snow, the dust of parched earth and the stinging smoke of the drifts, had played their part in hardening them, but still, a little deeper in color, a little stronger in limb, they were the same men one finds dwelling in many an English home. Standing beside a great open hearth, on which to aid the stove a huge pile of birch logs crackled joyously, the representative of an alien race drew a cunning bow across the strings of a dingy violin. He sprang from Gallic stock, a descendant of the old *coueurs* who for two centuries wandered in search of furs across the wilderness, even as far as the northern barrens, before the Briton came to farm. It was a waltz he played – at least, that was the time; but the music seemed filled with the sighing of limitless pines, and the air was probably known in France three hundred years ago. Still, weather-beaten men, and fair women who were considerably

less numerous, swept light-heartedly round to it, and when, declining refreshment then, we found a corner, Harry and I sat staring with all our eyes at the scene before us.

After the monotonous labor of the past two years the swish of light dresses and the rhythmic patter of feet, with the merry faces and joyous laughter, moved me strangely. All this seemed to belong to a different world from the one in which we had been living, and I wondered whether any of those dainty daughters of Carrington would deign to dance with me. They might have been transplanted like English roses from some walled garden at home, and their refined beauty had grown to a fuller blossom on the prairie. Still, I knew they would have faded in the dry heat of the dwellings in an Eastern town.

“How do those French-Canadians learn to play like that?” said Harry. “No one taught them; inherited it, I suppose. I know that air; it’s very old, and he’s taking liberties with it masterfully; now it’s like the cypress singing in the big coulée. Of course, it wasn’t learned in one generation, but why does a waltz of that kind unsettle one so, with a suggestion of ancient sorrow sighing through its gladness? But I’m forgetting, and vaporizing again. We are ox-drivers, you and I.”

I nodded silently, for I had not the gift of ready speech, and it was Harry who most often put my thoughts into words for me. Then I grew intent as he said:

“There she is. Who! – Miss Carrington – is there any one else to look at when she is in the room?”

Grace floated past us dressed as I had somewhere seen her before and could not recall it, though the memory puzzled me. Neither do I know what she wore, beyond that the fabric’s color was of the ruddy gold one sees among the stems of ripening grain, while wheat ears nestled between her neck and shoulder, and rustled like barley rippling to the breeze, as with the music embodied in each movement of her form she whirled by us on Ormond’s arm. He looked as he did when I last saw him, placidly good-humored, with the eyeglass dangling this time loosely by its cord.

Then I drew in my breath as the music ceased, and Raymond Lyle approached us, saying: “As usual, men are at a discount, but you have not had a dance, and most of the others have. Come, and I’ll find you partners. Ah, if you are not tired, Miss Carrington, will you take pity on an old friend of yours? I have many duties, and you will excuse me.”

He withdrew quickly, and Grace smiled. “One must never be too tired to dance with an old friend at a prairie feast,” she said, running her pencil through the initials on a program which had traveled several hundred miles from Winnipeg. Then I felt uncomfortable, for I guessed the letters R. L. represented my host, who had good-naturedly made way for me. It was a kindly thought, but Raymond Lyle, who was a confirmed bachelor living under his self-willed sister’s wing, had evidently guessed my interest and remembered the incident of the jibbing team. It was a square dance, and Harry with a laughing damsel formed my *vis-à-vis*, but having eyes only for my partner I saw little but a moving mixture of soft colors and embroidered deerskin, for some of the men were dressed in prairie fashion. I felt her warm breath on my neck, the shapely form yielding to my arm, and it was small wonder that I lost myself in the glamour of it, until with the crash of a final chord from the piano the music stopped.

“And you have not danced for four years!” she said as I led her through the press. “Well, it has all come back to you, and out here there is so much more than dancing for a man to do. Yes, you may put down another, there toward the end, and fill in the next one two. I have been looking forward to a quiet talk with you.”

I was left alone with pulses throbbing. There was very little in what she said, but her face showed a kindly interest in our doings, and it was no small thing that the heiress of Carrington should place me on the level of an old friend. Harry was chatting merrily with his late partner, who seemed amused at him, and this was not surprising, for Harry’s honest heart was somewhat strangely united with a silver tongue, and all women took kindly to him. I found other partners and he did the same, so it

was some time before we met again, and I remember remarking that all this gaiety and brightness seemed unreal after our quarters at Fairmead, and ended somewhat lamely:

“I suppose it’s out of mere pity she danced with me. As you said, we are of the soil, earthy, and a princess of the prairie is far beyond our sphere. Yet she seemed genuinely pleased to see me. If it were even you, Harry!”

He laughed as he pointed to a large mirror draped in cypress, saying, “Look into that. You are slow at understanding certain matters, Ralph. Not seen the whole of your noble self in a glass for two years? Neither have I. And it hasn’t dawned upon you that you came out in the transition stage – a grub, or shall we say a chrysalis? No, don’t wrinkle your forehead; it’s only an allegory. Now you have come out of the chrysalis – see?”

Part of this was certainly true, for at Coombs’ we had the broken half of a hand-glass to make our simple toilet, and at Fairmead a whole one of some four inches diameter which cost two bits, tin-backed, at the store, and I remember saying that it was an extravagance. Now I stared into the long glass, standing erect in my one gala garment of fringed deerskin.

“A little too bull-necked,” Harry remarked smiling, “but, except for Raymond Lyle, the stiffest-framed man in the room. Solid and slow from shoulders to ankles; head – shall we say that of a gladiator, or a prize-fighter? Good gracious, Ralph, remember you’re in a ball room, not trying on your trousseau.”

His remarks were not exactly flattering, but for the first time I felt glad to stand a strong man among those who had other advantages behind them, though I fumed inwardly when presently I heard Harry’s partner say:

“What a curious man your friend is! I saw him standing before the big glass actually admiring himself.”

And Harry had the mendacity to assure her that this was a favorite habit of mine.

Afterward I chatted for a time with the giver of the feast. We had much in common, for he was a stalwart plainly spoken man whose chief concern was the improvement of his holding, and from what he said it was clear that taking season by season his bank account increased but little, while he mentioned that several of his neighbors lost a certain sum yearly. There are two ways of farming in the West, and it seemed that after all Harry and I had chosen the better, the creeping on from acre to acre, living frugally, and doing oneself whatever is needed, then investing each dollar hardly saved in better implements.

Nevertheless, I saw that the men of Carrington who followed the other plan, spending and hiring freely, were doing a good work for the country, because even if they lost a small sum each year most of them could afford it, and their expenses would have been much greater at home. They helped to maintain a demand for good horses and the product of clever workmen’s skill; they supported the storekeepers of the wooden towns; and the poorer settlers could always earn a few dollars by working for them. So it dawned upon me that it is well for the nation that some are content to take their pleasure, as these men did, in an occupation that brought them small profit, sinking their surplus funds for the benefit of those who will follow them. Neither does the mother country lose, because she reaps the fruit of their labors in the shape of cheap and wholesome food.

At last the conversation drifted around to the founder of Carrington.

“An austere man,” said Lyle, “and he’s somewhat different from the rest of us – ready to gather in wherever he can, very hard to get ahead of at a deal; but if he is keen it’s all for the sake of his daughter. There are two things Carrington is proud of, one is this settlement, and the other his heiress. He’s not exactly an attractive personage, but there are whispers that some painful incident in her mother’s life soured him, and one learns to respect him. His word is better than most other men’s bond, and if his will is like cast iron his very determination often saves trouble in the end.”

Silence succeeded, for bold chords of music held the assembly still, and I saw Harry seated at the piano, which apparently had escaped serious damage in its long transit across the prairie. This

was a surprise, for I had not suspected Harry of musical proficiency. There was power in his fingers, hardened as they were, and when the ringing prelude to an English ballad filled the room more than his partner felt that he could call up a response to his own spirit from the soul of the instrument. The lad beside him also sang well, perhaps because he was young and sentiment was strong within him, but sturdy labor under the open heaven seems inimical to the development of hypercritical cynicism, and the men who at home would probably have applauded that song with an indulgent smile listened with kindling eyes and then made the long room ring with their bravos. Here, far away from the land that bred them, they were Britons still, and proud of their birthright.

Then Grace Carrington sang, and I would have given years of my life for Harry's skill, which seemed a bond between them as she smiled gratefully upon him. The words were simple, as became the work of a master who loved the open, and the music flowed with them like the ripple of a glancing water; so a deeper silence settled upon all, and I was back in England where a sparkling beck leaped out from the furze of Lingdale and sped in flashing shallows under the yellow fern, while somewhere beyond the singer's voice I could almost hear the alders talking to the breeze. When it ceased the sound grew louder, but it was only a bitter blast that came from the icy Pole moaning about the homestead of Lone Hollow.

Raymond Lyle stepped forward to express the wish of the rest, and Grace bent her fair head to confer with Harry, who nodded gravely, after which she stood still, while a stately prelude that was curiously familiar awoke old memories. Then the words came, and from the lips of others they might have seemed presumptuous or out of place, but Grace Carrington delivered them as though they were a message which must be hearkened to, and there was an expectant hush when the first line, "A sower went forth sowing," rang clearly forth. Later some of those about me breathed harder, and I saw that big Raymond's eyes were hazy, while one hard brown hand was clenched upon his knee, as in sinking cadence we heard again, "Within a hallowed acre He sows yet other grain."

Then after the last note died away and there was only the moaning of the wind, he said simply, "Thank you, Miss Carrington. I am glad you sang it at the Lone Hollow harvest home."

"I would never have played it here for any one else," said Harry presently. "These things are not to be undertaken casually, but she – well, I felt they had to listen, and I did the best that was in me. I think it was her clean-hearted simplicity."

It was some time afterward when I led Grace out and spent a blissful ten minutes swinging through the mazes of a prairie dance, before we found a nook under dark spruce branches from the big coulée, where Grace listened with interest while I told her of our experiences in the Dominion. The background of somber sprays enhanced her fair beauty, and her dress, which, though there was azure about it, was of much the same color, melted into the festoon of wheat stalks below. The French-Canadian was playing another of his weird waltzes, and it may have been this that reminded me, for now I remembered how I had seen her so before.

"You will not laugh, I hope, when I tell you that all this seems familiar," I said hesitatingly. "Sometimes in a strange country one comes upon a scene that one knows perfectly, and we feel that, perhaps in dreams, we have seen it all before. Why it is so, I cannot tell, but once in fancy I saw you with a dress exactly like the one you are wearing now, and the tall wheat behind you. Of course, it sounds ridiculous, but, as Harry says, we do not know everything, and you believe me, don't you?"

Grace's face grew suddenly grave, and there was a heightened color in it as she answered: "Your friend is a philosopher, besides a fine musician, and I quite believe you. I have had such experiences – but I think these fancies, if fancies they are, are best forgotten. Still, tell me, did you dream or imagine anything more?"

"Yes," I said, still puzzled as a dim memory came back, "I saw your father too. He seemed in trouble, and I was concerned in it. This I think was on the prairie, but there were tall pines too; while across the whole dream picture drove an alternate haze of dust and snow."

Grace shivered as though the relation troubled her, and was silent until she said with a smile:

“It must be that ghostly music. Louis of Sapin Rouge has missed his vocation. We will talk no more of it. You once did me a kindness; I wonder whether you would repeat it.”

“I would go to the world’s end,” I commenced hotly, but stopped abashed as she checked me with a gesture, though I fancied that she did not seem so displeased at my boldness as she might have been. Then she answered, smiling:

“I thought you were too staid and sensible for such speeches, and they hardly become you, because of course you do not mean it. It is nothing very serious. There are signs of bad weather, and my aunt is not strong, so, as Miss Lyle presses us, we shall stay here until to-morrow noon, and I want you to ride over and tell my father. He might grow uneasy about me – and for some reason I feel uneasy about him, while, as he has been ailing lately, I should not like for him to venture across the prairie. It seems unfair to ask you, but you are young and strong; and I should like you to meet him. He has his peculiarities, so our neighbors say, but he has ever been a most indulgent parent to me, and he can be a very firm friend. You will do this, as a favor, won’t you?”

She gave me her hand as she rose, and, mastering a senseless desire to do more than this, I bowed over it and hurried away, feeling that hers was the favor granted, for Ormond and many others would gladly have ridden fifty miles through a blizzard to do her bidding. It was for this reason that I made my excuses to our host quietly, and Harry laughed as he said: “I’ll ride over with the others for you when the dance is finished, but that won’t be until nearly dawn. The length of these prairie festivities is equaled only by their rarity. But beware, Ralph. You are a poor wheat-grower, and too much of those bright eyes is not good for you.”

I was glad of the skin coat and fur cap before I even reached the stables, and Jasper’s horse made trouble when I led him out. He knew the signs of the weather and desired to stay there, because they were not promising. Now, though winter is almost Arctic in that region, the snow-fall is capricious and generally much lighter than that further east, though it can come down in earnest now and then. Thus, swept by the wind, the grass was bare on the levels, or nearly so, and there was no passage for steel runners, while our poor wagon, which would have carried us much more snugly swathed in wrappings, had broken down, as when wanted it usually did. So, shivering to the backbone, I swung myself into the saddle and hardened my heart to face the bitter ride.

CHAPTER VIII

HELD UP

It was very dark. The wind had the coldness of death in it, and when the lights of Lone Hollow had faded behind the obscurity closed round me like a thick curtain. Still, trusting to an instinctive sense of direction men acquire in that land, I pushed on for the big coulée – one of those deep ravines that fissure the prairie and much resemble a railway cutting. This one was larger than the rest, and Carrington Manor stood near one end of it. The horse evidently had little liking for the journey, and did his best to shorten it, while I had hard work to keep my mittened hands from freezing as we swept onward through the night.

In places a thin carpet of snow-dust muffled the beat of hoofs, and there was no sound but the mournful shrilling of the wind, which emphasized the great emptiness and sense of desolation until I almost felt that I had ridden out of our busy life into primeval chaos. We are inclined to be superstitious on the prairie, which is not greatly to be wondered at. Fifty yards from the lighted homestead in wintertime there is only an overpowering loneliness, where Death with his ally the Frost King reigns supreme; while, living closer to nature, we learn that there are even yet many mysteries, and man plays but a small part in the business of the universe. Still, for a time the warmth within me kept out the frost; for Grace Carrington's hand had rested in mine, and I understood how the thought of service sustains the Northwest troopers in their lonely vigil. They served the nation, but I was serving Grace.

Presently even this consolation grew fainter, and the spell of the white wilderness oppressed my spirits; for the air was filled with warning, and I knew that heavy snow was not far off. Sometimes very silently a dim shadow flitted past, and the horse started, snorting as he quickened his pace with the white steam whirling behind him. It may have been a coyote, or perhaps a timber wolf; for though the antelope had departed south, the settlers said that both from the bush of the Saskatchewan and beyond the Cypress hills the lean and grizzled beasts had come down into the prairie. Nevertheless, their noiseless passage harmonized with the surroundings; and at last I grew thankful for a slight drowsiness which blunted the imagination. But there were other riders out on the waste that night, and, with one hand on the slung rifle, I reined in the horse as three white-sprinkled figures came up at a gallop. Generally, as far as anything human is concerned, the prairie is as safe at midnight, if not safer, than a street in London town; but because game is plentiful there is generally a gun in the wagon, and when the settlers ride out they often carry a rifle at their back.

"Halt!" cried a voice I recognized; and there was a jingle of steel as two skin-wrapped troopers of the Northwest Police wheeled their horses on either side of me, while another, who spoke with authority, grasped my bridle. Even in that darkness I could see the ready carbines, and, knowing what manner of men these riders were, I was glad I could meet them peaceably.

"Your name and business," said the voice of Sergeant Macfarlane; and a disappointed laugh followed my reply as that worthy added, "Then if ye have no' been raiding Coombs lately ye can pass, friend. Seen no one on the prairie? I'm sorry. Four cattle-lifting rustlers held up Clearwater Creek, and we're going south for the next post to head them off from the boundary. Well, time is precious. A fair journey til ye. It's a very bitter night, and snowing beyond."

With a faint clatter they vanished again; and I did not envy them their long ride to the next post, with a blizzard brewing. When his work is over or the snow comes down the settler may sleep snugly and sound, or lounge in tranquil contentment beside the twinkling stove, while, as the price of his security, the Northwest Police, snatching sometimes a few hours' rest under the gray cloud in a trench of snow, and sometimes riding a grim race with death, keep watch and ward over the vast territories. We do not rear desperadoes on the prairie, though some few are sent to us. Neither do

they take root and flourish among us, because ours is a hard country and there are not many men in it worth robbing. However, there had been trouble over the border when the rich Cattle Barons strove to crowd out the poor man, and the hardest hit among the latter, with murderous Winchesters, lay in wait for the oppressor. I do not know the wrongs and rights of the whole question; neither were details of every skirmish published by the American press; but cruel things were done by each side, and it took a strong force of United States cavalry to restore order. Then broken men who had lost their livelihood, and some with a price upon their heads, made their name a terror on both sides of the frontier and kept the troopers busy.

So I was glad that those particular outlaws had journeyed south, and was even more pleased when I reached the coulée, for the cold was increasing and the ride had grown inexpressibly dreary. It was warmer down in the hollow among the trees, but so black that it was the horse rather than I that avoided them, while now and then a branch lashed my forehead like a whip. There were cypress among them resembling solid masses of gloom, and the wind howled weirdly; but at last I blundered up the winding trail into sight of Carrington Manor. The big log-and-frame-built house was dark and silent, and though I knew that at least the majority of its inhabitants were at Lone Hollow the sight depressed me. Then, just as we drew clear of the trees, I checked the horse, for, silhouetted blackly against the sky, a single mounted figure kept watch over it. Perhaps it was instinctive caution, or it may have been that Grace's uneasiness had infected me, but I led Jasper's horse back into the coulée and hitched him to a tree, then, unslinging the rifle, stood still shivering as I watched the figure.

There was something sinister about it, and it might have been frozen stiff but for a faint rattle as the horse moved its head, while once I caught a rigid line across the saddle which suspiciously resembled a rifle. Then, recalling what Sergeant Macfarlane had said, I knew that while the police rode hot-foot toward the boundary the rustlers had doubled on their tracks to hold up Carrington Manor. It also struck me that as the main trail ran straight across the prairie the watcher knew nothing about the bridle-path through the coulée. In any case, it was plainly my duty to reach the homestead and render assistance if I could.

I made sure that the Winchester cylinder was filled with cartridges by pressing back the slide, and then I crept cautiously, with the dark trees for a background, toward the building, observing as I did so that the latter rendered the scout invisible to any one approaching by the direct trail. Then, stooping low, I crossed the bare space which divided me from the house, trusting that a humming bullet might not overtake me, and reached it safely with a heart that beat at twice its usual speed. It is one thing to face danger in hot blood, but it is quite another and much more unpleasant matter to slink through the darkness wondering whether a foe one cannot see is following each movement with a rifle. Neither is there any chance of hitting back in such cases; for it is my opinion, from watching a stricken deer, that at short ranges the blow comes almost simultaneously as the optic nerve records the flash and before the ear has caught the explosion. All this I considered as I flattened myself against the wall – for I was by no means braver than my fellows – and presently, yard by yard, wormed myself along it until I passed a corner.

There a light shone out across the snow from a window, and I am perfectly willing to admit that I crawled toward it on hands and knees, for angry voices now reached me, and I knew that if I raised myself and the watcher had changed his position he could see me. I reached the sill at last with the rifle clenched in one mittened hand; and while I debated on my next procedure I heard Colonel Carrington say slowly and fiercely:

“I will neither sign nor tell you!”

Then, reflecting that while one can always see into a lighted room those inside it cannot see out, I determined to risk the scout's vigilance, and raised my head cautiously, for it was plain that something quite unusual went on inside. I looked into a kind of ante-room on one side of the entrance, which the ruler of Carrington used as an office or study. He sat in a basket chair with a frown on his face and disdain in his eyes, while a burly man muffled in wrappings leaned on the table opposite him,

holding a rifle, the muzzle of which was turned toward the Colonel's breast. But there was no sign of fear about him, and I had heard the settlers say that nothing living could make Colonel Carrington flinch. An open check-book and some note-paper lay beside an inkstand on the table, and another armed ruffian stood near the stove. The door of the hall close by stood partly open, and their voices were audible through it.

"I guess it's quite simple, but you make us tired," the latter said. "You'll tell us where the chest is, and just fill in that check, with a letter vouching for the bearer and explaining why you want so much in a hurry. Then, as I said before, you'll ride south with us a day or two while we arrange for cashing it, after which we'll let you go safely, on our honor."

Colonel Carrington laughed sardonically, and I could fancy his thin lips curling under the gray mustache before he answered:

"I hardly consider that a sufficient guarantee. Again, I will neither sign nor tell you where the chest is. Confusion to you!"

"You're a hard man," said the other almost admiringly. "If we'd had you to head us we'd have bluffed off Uncle Sam's troopers at the Cypress range. Still, we've no time for fooling, and if Jim finds the chest without you we'll risk putting up the price a thousand dollars or so. Jim is tolerably handy at finding things. See here, you have got to sign it, and sign it now, before this Winchester makes a mess of you!"

The Colonel glanced at the rifle coolly, as he answered: "I fail to see what good that would do. My handwriting is peculiar; you couldn't imitate it, while you would certainly be hanged when the troopers laid hands on you."

This was incontrovertible logic, and the two outlaws drawing apart conferred with each other softly, while I debated what I should do. The casement was a double one, but I felt sure I could drive a bullet through one of them. Still, even in the circumstances it looked too much like murder, and to this day I have never taken the life of a man, though occasionally forced into handling one roughly. Before any decision could be arrived at a tramp of feet in the hall showed that somebody approached under a burden.

"Keep the muzzle on him," said one. "I guess Jim has found the coffer, and we'll make sure of that. I'll help him to cinch it on the horse if we can't open it. Colonel, we'll have to fine you the further thousand dollars."

I realized it was high time for me to vacate that position unless I wished the couple to discover me, and so I slipped back into the shadow, just in time, as they strode out carrying something. I watched them vanish into the blackness, heard the scout answer their hail, and then I crawled back swiftly – toward the door this time. A glance through the window in passing showed me that the remaining outlaw stood with his back toward the entrance, and his eyes fixed on the Colonel. The door was half closed when I reached it, and for a moment I stood there shortening my grip on the rifle and gathering my breath; then with a bound I drove it inward, and whirled aloft the butt of the Winchester.

The outlaw twisted round on his heels; but he moved an instant too late, for even as his fingers tightened on the trigger the steel heel-plate descended in the center of his face, and I felt something crunch in under it. He staggered sideways, there was a crash as the rifle exploded harmlessly, and before he could recover I had him by the neck and hurled him half-choked through the door. I had the sense to slam it and slip the bolt home; then, while I stood panting, the Colonel prepared to improve our position.

"Close those shutters and screw down the wing-nut hard," he said, hanging the lamp close beside the door. "Now, stand here in the shadow. I am much obliged to you, but you should have made certain of that fellow."

It was only natural that he should feel resentment; but there was a cold vindictiveness in his tone which made me realize that it was as well for the outlaw that I had not left him in the room. Then he spoke again:

“We have two good weapons; that rascal’s cylinder is charged – I saw him fill it out of my own bandolier, and there is an armory in the other room. They took me by surprise – in Western parlance, got the drop on me. Of course they’ll come back, but all the doors and windows are fast, and we could hear them breaking in, while in this kind of work the risk is with the aggressor.”

A pounding on the door cut him short, and a hoarse, partly muffled voice reached us:

“We’re about sick of fooling, and mean solid business now,” it said. “Open, and be quick about it, before we smash that door down and try moral suasion by roasting both of you.”

“You should have stayed when you were in,” was the ironical answer. “No doubt you have observed the light under the door. Well, the first man across the threshold will get a bullet through him before he even sees us. Haven’t you realized yet that this undertaking is too big for you?”

“Curse him; he’s busted my best teeth in. Hunt round and find something for a battering ram,” cried another voice, but though the assailants had possibly not caught all the answer, they evidently understood the strength of our position, for we heard them moving away.

“Gone to open the chest in the stables; they won’t find much in it,” said Colonel Carrington. “They will try a fresh move next time. Mr. Lorimer, of Fairmead, are you not? I wish to express my obligations again.”

He took it very coolly, as it appeared he took everything, and smiled curiously as, glancing at his watch, he said half-aloud: “Well, there are worse things than a clean swift ending, and there was a time when I should not have stepped aside to let death pass. But I apologize, Mr. Lorimer, for inflicting such talk on you. Hope we shall be friends if we come out of this safely. The check? – yes, we’ll put it away. It might have saved trouble to sign it, but you see it was her mother’s money, and I only hold it in trust for my daughter. Neither are we as rich as some suppose us to be.”

His grim face relaxed, and his voice sounded different when he spoke of Grace, while a few moments passed before he added:

“It cannot be far from dawn, and there’s not a soul in Carrington except you and myself. Grace took all my people with her to help at Lone Hollow. So, unless you are inclined to stalk them, which I should hardly suggest, as they might be too clever for you, we must await our friends’ arrival and make the best of it.”

I had no inclination whatever to try the stalking. To take a kneeling shot at an unsuspecting man seemed in any circumstances almost a crime; so we sat each with a rifle laid across his knees, and for the first time in two years I tasted excellent tobacco. But the vigil grew trying. The house seemed filled with whispers and mysterious noises. My throat grew dry, and the Colonel laughed when once I moved sharply as a rat scurried behind the wainscot. Neither of us felt inclined to talk, and our eyes were fixed steadfastly upon the door, until at last the lamp seemed to rise and fall with each respiration. Then the Colonel approached the window as though listening, after glancing once more at his watch.

“It must be daybreak, and I hear something,” he said. “There is probably one of them watching, but we must chance it,” and he moved softly toward the door. When we stood outside the cold of the morning went through me like a knife. Still a rapid beat of horse hoofs rose out of the big coulée, and it was evident that the outlaws had heard them, for we saw two men busy with the horses at the stable door, while two more disappeared behind the bank of sods that walled off the vegetable garden. What their purpose was, unless they meant to check any accession to our strength while their comrades escaped with the coffer, was not apparent. It was blowing strongly now, and the air was thick with falling snow, but I made out two riders who resembled Harry and Ormond coming toward us at a gallop, with another horseman some distance behind. Then a hoarse shout reached us – “Stop right there, and wheel your horses before we plug you!”

I could not see into the hollow beneath the wall because it was some distance off and the snow whirled about it, but I could imagine the Winchester barrel resting on the sods while a steady eye stared through the sights, and knew that neither Ormond nor Harry carried weapons. So I started at a flounder toward them, roaring as I went:

“Go back – for your life, go back!”

They evidently did not hear me, though we were afterwards to hear the reason for an apparent act of madness. Harry was always reckless, and Ormond coolly brave, while as I ran I saw the two horses flying at the wall. A streak of red flame blazed out low down in the snow, a mounted man passed me leading two horses, and I neither knew nor cared whether he noticed me, for I felt suddenly dizzy, wondering whether the bullet had gone home. Neither did I hear any report at all, for my whole attention was concentrated on the black shapes of the riders breast high beyond the wall. Then one beast rose into the air, and I saw Ormond swing a riding crop round backward as though for the sword cut from behind the shoulder. A soft thud followed, Harry’s horse cleared the sods like a bird, and I blazed off my rifle at a venture toward the hollow as they thundered neck and neck past me. It was clear that empty-handed they had ridden either over or through the foe.

After that events followed too rapidly to leave a clear impression. A pair of half-seen figures which appeared at the other end of the hollow scrambled for the empty saddles, and one seemed to help his companion. Then they vanished into the whirling haze, and Colonel Carrington’s Winchester rapped as he emptied the magazine at the flying foe, while by the time the new arrivals had mastered their excited beasts there was only a narrow circle of prairie shut in by blinding snow.

“Very glad to find you safe, sir,” said Ormond. “We met the Blackfoot who peddles moccasins, and he told us he had seen four men he thought were Stevens’ gang heading for Carrington, so we pushed on as fast as we could. Perhaps if we three went on with rifles we might overtake them.”

Harry looked eager, and I was willing, but Colonel Carrington was wisest:

“You have done gallantly,” he said, “but it would only be throwing lives away. The snow is coming in earnest, and it strikes me they have gone to their account unless they find shelter in a coulée.”

Then they dismounted, and a hired man, who had lagged behind through indifferent horseflesh and no fault of his own, was despatched to prepare breakfast, and it was a merry party that assembled round the table. Even the ruler of Carrington’s grim face relaxed.

“I am glad to make the acquaintance of both of you,” he said. “You will make the best of Carrington I hope for a day or two.”

We were nothing loth, for twenty miles of deepening snow lay between us and our homestead, where we had little to do, while to complete my satisfaction Grace and her train arrived in the Lone Hollow sleigh early the next morning, and on hearing the story her eyes glistened as she thanked me. “I am so glad I sent you,” she said, “and I feel I owe my father’s safety, perhaps his life, to you. It is a debt I can never repay.”

It was late that afternoon when another sleigh drew up before the Carrington gate, and three white-sheeted troopers lifted a heavy burden out of it. The thing, which seemed a shapeless heap of snow and wrappings, hung limply between them as they carried it into the hall, while it was Sergeant Angus Macfarlane who explained their errand.

“Lay him down there gently, boys,” he said. “No, stand back, Miss Carrington, these kind o’ sights are no for you. We found him in a coulée after yon Blackfoot peddler had told us Stevens had fooled us, and ye’ll mind it’s no that easy to fool the Northwest Police. He’s one o’ the gang, but the poor soul’s got several ribs broken, an’ after lying out through the blizzard I’m thinking he’s near his end. It’s a long ride to the outpost, forbye we have no comforts. Maybe ye’ll take him – ay, I ken he’s a robber, but ye cannot leave him to perish in the snow.”

He flung back the wrappings, and before I could stop her Grace bent down over the drawn white face with the red froth on the lips, while Ormond said quietly:

“Very bad, poor devil! I fancied Robin’s hoofs struck something that yielded when he made a landing. You will take him in if it’s only to oblige me, sir.”

Grace stood upright with tender compassion shining in her wet eyes as she fixed them on the old man.

“I am a woman now, father,” she said, “and I should like to help to cure him if it can be done. We shall do everything possible for him, anyway. Bring him forward, Sergeant Angus. Geoffrey, you know something of surgery.”

“I don’t make war on dying men. You will do whatever pleases you, Grace,” the ruler of Carrington answered, indifferently.

They carried their burden into another room, and I waited beside the stove, with two faces stamped on my memory. The one was that of the wounded man with its contraction of pain and glassy stare, and the other the countenance of Grace Carrington transfigured for a moment by a great pity that added to its loveliness. Still, the coming of this unexpected guest cast a gloom upon us, and we seldom saw Grace, while Ormond, who seemed to know a little of everything, once said on passing: “I have fixed him up as well as I could, but I think a broken rib has pierced his lung, and he’s sinking rapidly. However, Miss Carrington is doing her best, and he could not have a more efficient nurse.”

It was late in the afternoon when, on tapping at the door in search of tidings, Ormond called me in. The daylight was fading, but I could see the limp, suffering shape on the bed, and Grace sitting near the window, leaning forward as though listening.

“Light-headed at times!” said Ormond; “but he was asking for you. Do you feel any easier now? Here’s another inquirer anxious to hear good news of you.”

The man turned his drawn face toward me, and tried to smile as he said: “I guess you’re very good. Hope you don’t bear malice. You oughtn’t to anyhow – nearly broke my neck when you fired me through the doorway. All in the way of business, and I’m corralled now.”

I bent my head with a friendly gesture, for even I could read death in his face, and the outlaw, glancing toward Grace, added:

“If I’d known you, Missy, we’d never have held up this homestead. White people all through, and you’re a prairie daisy. What made me do it? Well, I guess that’s a long story, and some of it might scare you. A big man froze me off my land, and some one rebranded my few head of stock. Law! we don’t count much on that; it’s often the biggest rascals corral the offices, and we just laid for them with the rifle. They were too many for us – and this is the end of it.”

Grace moved toward him whispering something I could not catch, but the man smiled feebly, and I heard the grim answer:

“No; I guess it’s rather too late for that. I lived my own way, and I can die that way too. Don’t back down on one’s partners; kind of mean, isn’t it? And if it’s true what you’re saying I’ll just accept my sentence. Going out before the morning; but I sent two of the men who robbed me to perdition first.”

Ormond raised his hand for silence, and again I could hear the shrilling of the bitter wind that was never still. Then he said softly: “You are only exciting him, and had better go,” and with a last glance at Grace’s slender figure stooping beside the bed I went out softly.

It was nearly midnight and a cold creepiness pervaded everything when he joined the rest of us round the stove.

“Gone!” he said simply. “Just clenched his hand and died. There was some fine material wasted in that man. Well, I think he was wronged somehow, and I’m sorry for him.”

We turned away in silence, for a shadow rested upon Carrington, while the outlaw lay in state in the homestead he had helped to rob, until the Northwest Police bore what was left of him away. But before that time we rode back to Fairmead.

CHAPTER IX

A RECKONING

It was some time after the holding up of Carrington Manor before I was able, with Jasper's assistance, to fulfill my promise to Minnie Fletcher. Jasper knew everybody within fifty miles up and down the C. P. R. Line, and at least as far across the prairie, while they all had a good word for him. So when he heard the story he drove us over to Clearwater, where an elevator had been built beside the track, only to find that the agent in charge of it had already a sufficient staff. He, however, informed us that the manager of a new creamery wanted a handy man to drive round collecting milk from the scattered homesteads who could also help at the accounts and clerking. Such a combination might not have been usual in England, but in the Western Dominion one may find University graduates digging trenches and unfortunate barristers glad to earn a few dollars as railroad hands.

"I guess we'll fix him up in that creamery," said Jasper. "The man who runs it was raised not far from the old folks' place in Ontario," and we started forthwith on an apparently endless ride across the frozen prairie. Some of our horses are not much to look at, and others are hard to drive, but the way they can haul the light wagons or even the humble ground sleigh along league after league would surprise those not used to them. We spent one night with a Highland crofter in a dwelling that resembled a burrow, for most of it was underground, but the rammed earth walls kept out the cold and the interior was both warm and clean. We spent another in somewhat grim conviviality at the creamery, for the men whose fathers hewed sites for what are now thriving towns out of the bush of Ontario are rather hard and staunch than sprightly.

Still, the manager did his best for us, and said on parting, "Send him right along. I'll give any friend of yours a show if Jasper will vouch for him. Pay's no great thing as yet, but he can live on it, and if we flourish he'll sail ahead with us."

So we brought Thomas Fletcher out from Winnipeg by joint subscription, and it cost us rather more than we cared about, for he came second class, while at that time Harry and I would have traveled "Colonist," or on opportunity would have earned our passage by tending stock. If we could spare a dollar in those days we wanted it for our land. The old jauntiness had gone out of Fletcher. He looked worn and thinner, with, I fancied, signs of indulgence in alcohol, but he professed his willingness to work hard at anything that would keep a roof over Minnie's head. We drove him across to the creamery, and the manager seemed disappointed when he saw him, while on the journey home Jasper said:

"I've been sizing up that young man. Strikes me he's too much like the trash you British are over-fond of dumping on to us. Why can't your people understand that if a man's a dead failure over there we don't want him? Dare say he's honest, but he's got no sand. Let that fellow sit up and talk over a glass of rye whiskey and a bad cigar and he's right there; set him wrestling with a tough job and he'll double up."

Jasper posed as a judge of character, and I felt inclined to agree with him. Fletcher had not the appearance of a vicious or dishonest man, but I fancied under pressure of circumstances he might become one.

We built a new stable and barn that winter, hauling suitable logs – and they were very hard to find – ten miles across the prairie, while Harry nearly lost his hands by frost-bite bringing in one load. Nevertheless, and there is leisure in that season, we drove over now and then to Fletcher's humble dwelling beside the creamery, and were both embarrassed the first time Minnie thanked us with tears in her eyes. Already she was recovering her good looks and spirits, but as Fletcher's pay would be scanty until spring the odd bags of potatoes and flour we brought them were evidently acceptable. We had received help freely when we needed it, and it seemed only fitting that now we should help

others in turn; so we did what little we could, and, as transpired later, it brought trouble on us. Also we managed to pay a few visits to other neighbors who lived at any distance within thirty miles, including a few farms of the Carrington group, where, perhaps especially for Harry's sake, they made us welcome, and we went twice to Carrington Manor. The second visit was a memorable one.

It was a still, starlit night with an intense frost and a few pale green streamers shimmering in the north, but the big main room of the Manor with its open fireplace and central stove was very warm and snug. Our team was safely stabled, for owing to the distance we could not well return that night, and since the affair with the cattle thieves Colonel Carrington had so far as in him lay been cordial. He sat beside the glowing birch logs, silent and stern of aspect as usual, with a big shaggy hound which I had seen roll over a coyote with a broken spine curled up against his knee, while the firelight flickered redly across his lean, bronzed face. Opposite sat his sister, who partly resembled him, though in her case the Carrington dignity was softened by a winning sympathy. She was an old maid of a fine but perhaps not common type, white-haired and stately, and in all things gracious.

Harry, who was a favorite of hers, knelt with one knee on a wolf-skin rug, turning over a collection of photographs on a low table that she might see, and she smiled at some of his comments. Ormond leaned against the wall behind them interposing whimsical sallies, and casting occasional glances toward Grace and myself. Resigning his commission, he had lately, we understood, purchased land near the Manor. One or two other of the Colonel's subjects also were present. Being lighted with shaded lamps that shed their soft radiance only where it was wanted, portions of the long room remained in shadow, so Grace and I, sitting near one window, could look out between the looped-back curtains across the prairie. High over the sweep of dimly glimmering snow hung a vault of fathomless indigo. It was not such a sky as one sees in England, but rather a clear transparency where the stars, ranged one behind the other, led the gaze back and lost it in infinity, while at intervals a steely scintillation flickered up from horizon to zenith and then back again. Feathery frost-flowers on the window framed the picture like a screen of delicate embroidery.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

Текст предоставлен ООО «ЛитРес».

Прочитайте эту книгу целиком, [купив полную легальную версию](#) на ЛитРес.

Безопасно оплатить книгу можно банковской картой Visa, MasterCard, Maestro, со счета мобильного телефона, с платежного терминала, в салоне МТС или Связной, через PayPal, WebMoney, Яндекс.Деньги, QIWI Кошелек, бонусными картами или другим удобным Вам способом.