Bindloss Harold

The Cattle-Baron's Daughter

Harold Bindloss

The Cattle-Baron's Daughter

http://www.litres.ru/pages/biblio_book/?art=23150843
The Cattle-Baron's Daughter:

Содержание

Harold Bindloss
The Cattle-Baron's Daughter

I
THE PORTENT

The hot weather had come suddenly, at least a month earlier than usual, and New York lay baking under a scorching sun when Miss Hetty Torrance sat in the coolest corner of the Grand Central Depot she could find. It was by her own wish she had spent the afternoon in the city unattended, for Miss Torrance was a self-reliant young woman; but it was fate and the irregularity of the little gold watch, which had been her dead mother's gift, that brought her to the depot at least a quarter of an hour too soon. But she was not wholly sorry, for she had desired more solitude and time for reflection than she found in the noisy city, where a visit to an eminent modiste had occupied most of her leisure. There was, she had reasons for surmising, a decision of some moment to be made that night, and as yet she was no nearer arriving at it than she had been when the little note then in her pocket had been handed her.

Still, it was not the note she took out when she found a seat apart from the hurrying crowd, but a letter from her father,

Torrance, the Cattle-Baron, of Cedar Range. It was terse and to the point, as usual, and a little smile crept into the girl's face as she read.

"Your letter to hand, and so long as you have a good time don't worry about the bills. You'll find another five hundred dollars at the bank when you want them. Thank God, I can give my daughter what her mother should have had. Two years since I've seen my little girl, and now it seems that somebody else is wanting her! Well, we were made men and women, and if you had been meant to live alone dabbling in music you wouldn't have been given your mother's face. Now, I don't often express myself this way, but I've had a letter from Captain Jackson Cheyne, U. S. Cavalry, which reads as straight as I've found the man to be. Nothing wrong with that family, and they've dollars to spare; but if you like the man I can put down two for every one of his. Well, I might write a good deal, but you're too much like your father to be taken in. You want dollars and station, and I can see you get them, but in a contract of this kind the man is everything. Make quite sure you're getting the right one."

There was a little more to the same purpose, and when she slipped the letter into her pocket Hetty Torrance smiled.

"The dear old man!" she said. "It is very like him; but whether Jake is the right one or not is just what I can't decide."

Then she sat still, looking straight in front of her, a very attractive picture, as some of the hurrying men who turned to glance at her seemed to find, in her long light dress. Her face,

which showed a delicate oval under the big white hat, was a trifle paler than is usual with most Englishwomen of her age, and the figure the thin fabric clung about less decided in outline. Still, the faint warmth in her cheeks emphasized the clear pallor of her skin, and there was a depth of brightness in the dark eyes that would have atoned for a good deal more than there was in her case necessity for. Her supple slenderness also became Hetty Torrance well, and there was a suggestion of nervous energy in her very pose. In addition to all this, she was a rich man's daughter, who had been well taught in the cities, and had since enjoyed all that wealth and refinement could offer her. It had also been a cause of mild astonishment to the friends she had spent the past year with, that with these advantages, she had remained Miss Torrance. They had been somewhat proud of their guest, and opportunities had not been wanting had she desired to change her status.

While she sat there musing, pale-faced citizens hurried past, great locomotives crawled to and fro, and long trains of cars, white with the dust of five hundred leagues, rolled in. Swelling in deeper cadence, the roar of the city came faintly through the din; but, responsive to the throb of life as she usually was, Hetty Torrance heard nothing of it then, for she was back in fancy on the grey-white prairie two thousand miles away. It was a desolate land of parched grass and bitter lakes with beaches dusty with alkali, but a rich one to the few who held dominion over it, and she had received the homage of a princess there. Then she heard

a voice that was quite in keeping with the spirit of the scene, and was scarcely astonished to see that a man was smiling down on her.

He was dressed in city garments, and they became him; but the hand he held out was lean, and hard, and brown, and, for he stood bareheaded, a paler streak showed where the wide hat had shielded a face that had been darkened by stinging alkali dust from the prairie sun. It was a quietly forceful face, with steady eyes, which had a little sparkle of pleasure in them, and were clear and brown, while something in the man's sinewy pose suggested that he would have been at home in the saddle. Indeed, it was in the saddle that Hetty Torrance remembered him most vividly, hurling his half-tamed broncho straight at a gully down which the nondescript pack streamed, while the scarcely seen shape of a coyote blurred by the dust, streaked the prairie in front of them.

"Hetty!" he said.

"Larry!" said the girl. "Why, whatever are you doing here?"

Then both laughed a little, perhaps to conceal the faint constraint that was upon them, for a meeting between former comrades has its difficulties when one is a man and the other a woman, and the bond between them has not been defined.

"I came in on business a day or two ago," said the man. "Ran round to check some packages. I'm going back again to-morrow."

"Well," said the girl, "I was in the city, and came here to meet

Flo Schuyler and her sister. They'll be in at four."

The man looked at his watch. "That gives us 'most fifteen minutes, but it's not going to be enough. We'll lose none of it. What about the singing?"

Hetty Torrance flushed a trifle. "Larry," she said, "you are quite sure you don't know?"

The man appeared embarrassed, and there was a trace of gravity in his smile. "Your father told me a little; but I haven't seen him so often of late. Any way, I would sooner you told me."

"Then," said the girl, with the faintest of quivers in her voice, "the folks who understand good music don't care to hear me."

There was incredulity, which pleased his companion, in the man's face, but his voice vaguely suggested contentment.

"That is just what they can't do," he said decisively. "You sing most divinely."

"There is a good deal you and the boys at Cedar don't know, Larry. Any way, lots of people sing better than I do, but I should be angry with you if I thought you were pleased."

The man smiled gravely. "That would hurt. I'm sorry for you, Hetty; but again I'm glad. Now there's nothing to keep you in the city, you'll come back to us. You belong to the prairie, and it's a better place than this."

He spoke at an opportune moment. Since her cherished ambition had failed her, Hetty Torrance had grown a trifle tired of the city and the round of pleasure that must be entered into strenuously, and there were times when, looking back in reverie,

she saw the great silent prairie roll back under the red sunrise into the east, and fade, vast, solemn, and restful, a cool land of shadow, when the first pale stars came out. Then she longed for the jingle of the bridles and the drumming of the hoofs, and felt once more the rush of the gallop stir her blood. But this was what she would not show, and her eyes twinkled a trifle maliciously.

"Well, I don't quite know," she said. "There is always one thing left to most of us."

She saw the man wince ever so slightly, and was pleased at it; but he was, as she had once told him in the old days, grit all through, and he smiled a little.

"Of course!" he said. "Still, the trouble is that there are very few of us good enough for you. But you will come back for a little?"

Miss Torrance would not commit herself. "How are they getting along at the Range?"

"Doesn't your father write you?"

"Yes," said the girl, colouring a trifle. "I had a letter from him a few days ago, but he seldom mentioned what he was doing, and I want you to tell me about him."

The man appeared thoughtful. "Well," he said, "it's quite three months since I spoke to him. He was stirring round as brisk as ever, and is rolling the dollars in this year."

"But you used to be always at the Range."

The man nodded, but the slight constraint that was upon him did not escape the girl. "Still, I don't go there so often now. The

Range is lonesome when you are away."

Miss Torrance accepted the speech as one made by a comrade, and perhaps was wrong, but a tramp of feet attracted her attention then, and she looked away from her companion. Driven by the railroad officials, and led by an interpreter, a band of Teutons some five or six hundred strong filed into the station. Stalwart and stolid, tow-haired, with the stamp of acquiescent patience in their homely faces, they came on with the swing, but none of the usual spirit, of drilled men. They asked no questions, but went where they were led, and the foulness of the close-packed steerage seemed to cling about them. For a time the depot rang to the rhythmic tramp of feet, and when, at a sign from the interpreter, it stopped, two bewildered children, frowsy and unwashed, in greasy homespun, sat down and gazed at Miss Torrance with mild blue eyes. She signed to a boy who was passing with a basket slung before him, and made a little impatient gesture when the man slipped his hand into his pocket.

"No," she said; "you'll make me vexed with you. Tell him to give them all he has. They'll be a long while in the cars."

She handed the boy a silver coin, and while the children sat still, undemonstratively astonished, with the golden fruit about them, the man passed him a bill.

"Now get some more oranges, and begin right at the top of the line," he said. "If that doesn't see you through, come back to me for another bill."

Hetty Torrance's eyes softened. "Larry," she said, "that was

dreadfully good of you. Where are they all going to?"

"Chicago, Nebraska, Minnesota, Montana," said the man. "There are the cars coming in. Just out of Castle Garden, and it's because of the city improvements disorganizing traffic they're bringing them this way. They're the advance guard, you see, and there are more of them coming."

The tramp of feet commenced again, but this time it was a horde of diverse nationality, Englishmen, Irishmen, Poles, and Finns, but all with the stamp of toil, and many with that of scarcity upon them. Bedraggled, unkempt, dejected, eager with the cunning that comes of adversity, they flowed in, and Hetty Torrance's face grew pitiful as she watched them.

"Do they come every week like this and, even in our big country, have we got room for all of them?" she said.

There was a curious gleam in the man's brown eyes. "Oh, yes," he said. "It's the biggest and greatest country this old world has ever seen, and the Lord made it as a home for the poor – the folks they've no food or use for back yonder; and, while there are short-sighted fools who would close the door, we take them in, outcast and hopeless, and put new heart in them. In a few short years we make them men and useful citizens, the equal of any on this earth – Americans!"

Hetty Torrance nodded, and there was pride but no amusement in her smile; for she had a quick enthusiasm, and the reticence of Insular Britain has no great place in that country.

"Still," she said; "all these people coming in must make a

difference."

The man's face grew grave. "Yes," he said; "there will have to be a change, and it is coming. We are only outwardly democratic just now, and don't seem to know that men are worth more than millionaires. We have let them get their grip on our industries, and too much of our land, until what would feed a thousand buys canvas-backs, and wines from Europe for one. Isn't what we raise in California good enough for Americans?"

Miss Torrance's eyes twinkled. "Some of it isn't very nice, and they don't live on canvas-backs," she said. "Still, it seems to me that other men have talked like that quite a thousand years ago; and, while I don't know anyone better at breaking a broncho or cutting out a steer, straightening these affairs out is too big a contract for you."

The man laughed pleasantly. "That's all right, but I can do a little in the place I belong to, and the change is beginning there. Is it good for this country that one man should get rich feeding his cattle on leagues of prairie where a hundred families could make a living growing wheat?"

"Now," said the girl drily, "I know why you and my father haven't got on. Your opinions wouldn't please him, Larry."

"No," said the man, with a trace of embarrassment, "I don't think they would; and that's just why we've got to convince him and the others that what we want to do is for the good of the country."

Hetty Torrance laughed. "It's going to be hard. No man wants

to believe anything is good when he sees it will take quite a pile of dollars out of his pocket."

The man said nothing, and Hetty fancied he was not desirous of following up the topic, while as they sat silent a big locomotive backed another great train of emigrant cars in. Then the tramp of feet commenced again, and once more a frowsy host of outcasts from the overcrowded lands poured into the depot. Wagons piled with baggage had preceded them, but many dragged their pitiful belongings along with them, and the murmur of their alien voices rang through the bustle of the station. Hetty Torrance was not unduly fanciful, but those footsteps caused her, as she afterwards remembered, a vague concern. She believed, as her father did, that America was made for the Americans; but it was evident that in a few more years every unit of those incoming legions would be a citizen of the Republic, with rights equal to those enjoyed by Torrance of Cedar Range. She had seen that as yet the constitution gave no man more than he could by his own hand obtain; but it seemed not unlikely that some, at least, of those dejected, unkempt men had struck for the rights of humanity that were denied them in the older lands with dynamite and rifle.

Then, as the first long train of grimy cars rolled out close packed with their frowsy human freight, a train of another kind came in, and two young women in light dresses swung themselves down from the platform of a car that was sumptuous with polished woods and gilding. Miss Torrance rose as she saw them, and touched her companion.

"Come along, Larry, and I'll show you two of the nicest girls you ever met," she said.

The man laughed. "They would have been nicer if they hadn't come quite so soon," he said.

He followed his companion and was duly presented to Miss Flora and Miss Caroline Schuyler. "Larry Grant of Fremont Ranch," said Miss Torrance. "Larry is a great friend of mine."

The Misses Schuyler were pretty. Carolina, the younger, pale, blue-eyed, fair-haired and vivacious; her sister equally blonde, but a trifle quieter. Although they were gracious to him, Grant fancied that one flashed a questioning glance at the other when there was a halt in the conversation. Then, as if by tacit agreement, they left him alone a moment with their companion, and Hetty Torrance smiled as she held out her hand.

"I can't keep them waiting, but you'll come and see me," she said.

"I am going home to-morrow," said the man. "When are you coming, Hetty?"

The girl smiled curiously, and there was a trace of wistfulness in her eyes. "I don't quite know. Just now I fancy I may not come at all, but you will not forget me, Larry."

The man looked at her very gravely, and Hetty Torrance appeared to find something disconcerting in his gaze, for she turned her head away.

"No," he said, and there was a little tremor in his voice, "I don't think I shall forget you. Well, if ever you grow tired of the

cities you will remember the lonely folks who are longing to have you home again back there on the prairie."

Hetty Torrance felt her fingers quiver under his grasp, but the next moment he had turned away, and her companions noticed there was a faint pink tinge in her cheeks when she rejoined them. But being wise young women, they restrained their natural inquisitiveness, and asked no questions then.

In the meanwhile Grant, who watched them until the last glimpse of their light dresses was lost in the crowd, stood beside the second emigrant train vacantly glancing at the aliens who thronged about it. His bronzed face was a trifle weary, and his lips were set, but at last he straightened his shoulders with a little resolute movement and turned away.

"I have my work," he said, "and it's going to be quite enough for me."

II
HETTY TAKES HEED

It was evening when Hetty Torrance sat alone in a room of Mrs. Schuyler's house at Hastings-on-the-Hudson. The room was pretty, though its adornment was garish and somewhat miscellaneous, consisting as it did of the trophies of Miss Schuyler's European tour. A Parisian clock, rich in gilded scroll work to the verge of barbarity, contrasted with the artistic severity of one or two good Italian marbles, while these in turn stood quaintly upon choice examples of time-mellowed English cabinet-work. There was taste in them all, but they suffered from the juxtaposition, which, however, was somewhat characteristic of the country. Still, Miss Schuyler had not spoiled the splendid parquetrie floor of American timber.

The windows were open wide, and when a little breeze from the darkening river came up across the lawn, Hetty languidly raised her head. The coolness was grateful, the silken cushions she reclined amidst luxurious, but the girl's eyes grew thoughtful as they wandered round the room, for that evening the suggestion of wealth in all she saw jarred upon her mood. The great city lay not very far away, sweltering with its crowded tenement houses under stifling heat; and she could picture the toilers who herded there, gasping for air. Then her fancy fled further, following the

long emigrant train as it crawled west from side-track to side-track, close packed with humanity that was much less cared for than her father's cattle.

She had often before seen the dusty cars roll into a wayside depot to wait until the luxurious limited passed, and the grimy faces at the windows, pale and pinched, cunning, or coarsely brutal, after the fashion of their kind, had roused no more than a passing pity. It was, however, different that night, for Grant's words had roused her to thought, and she wondered with a vague apprehension whether the tramp of weary feet she had listened to would once more break in upon her sheltered life. Larry had foreseen changes, and he was usually right. Then she brushed these fancies into the background, for she had still a decision to make. Captain Cheyne would shortly arrive, and she knew what he came to ask. He was also a personable man, and, so far as the Schuylers knew, without reproach, while Hetty had seen a good deal of him during the past twelve months. She admitted a liking for him, but now that the time had come to decide, she was not certain that she would care to spend her life with him. As a companion, he left nothing to be desired, but, as had happened already with another man with whom Miss Torrance had been pleased, that position did not appear to content him; and she had misgivings about contracting a more permanent bond. It was almost a relief when Miss Schuyler came in.

"Stand up, Hetty. I want to look at you," she said.

Miss Torrance obeyed and stood before her, girlishly slender

in her long dress, though there was an indefinite suggestion of imperiousness in her dark eyes.

"Will I pass?" she asked.

Flora Schuyler surveyed her critically and then laughed. "Yes," she said. "You're pretty enough to please anybody, and there's a style about you that makes it quite plain you were of some importance out there on the prairie. Now you can sit down again, because I want to talk to you. Who's Larry Grant?"

"Tell me what you think of him."

Miss Schuyler pursed her lips reflectively. "Well," she said, "he's not New York. Quite a good-looking man, with a good deal in him, but I'd like to see him on horseback. Been in the cavalry? You're fond of them, you know."

"No," said Hetty, "but he knows more about horses than any cavalry officer. Larry's a cattle-baron."

"I never quite knew what the cattle-barons were, except that your father's one, and they're mostly rich," said Miss Schuyler.

Hetty's eyes twinkled. "I don't think Larry's very rich. They're the men or the sons of them, who went west when the prairie belonged to the Indians and the Blackfeet, Crows, and Crees made them lots of trouble. Still, they held the land they settled on, and covered it with cattle, until the Government gave it to them, 'most as much as you could ride across in a day, to each big rancher."

"Gave it to them?"

Hetty nodded. "A lease of it. It means the same thing. A few

of them, though I think it wasn't quite permitted, bought other leases in, and out there a cattle-baron is a bigger man than a railroad king. You see, he makes the law – all there is – as well as supports the industry, for there's not a sheriff in the country dares question him. The cattle-boys are his retainers, and we've a squadron of them at the Range. They'd do just what Torrance of Cedar told them, whatever it was, and there are few men who could ride with them in the U. S. Cavalry."

"Then," said Flora Schuyler, "if the Government ever encouraged homesteading in their country they'd make trouble."

Hetty laughed. "Yes," she said drily, "I guess they would, but no government dares meddle with us."

"Well," said Flora Schuyler, "you haven't told us yet who Larry is. You know quite well what I mean."

Hetty smiled. "I called him my partner when I was home. Larry held me on my first pony, and has done 'most whatever I wanted him ever since. Fremont isn't very far from the Range, and when I wanted to ride anywhere, or to have a new horse broken, Larry was handy."

Miss Schuyler appeared reflective, but there was a bond of confidence between the two, and the reserve that characterizes the Briton is much less usual in that country.

"It always seemed to me, my dear, that an arrangement of that kind is a little rough on the man, and I think this one is too good to spoil," she said.

Hetty coloured a trifle, but she smiled. "It is all right with

Larry. He never expected anything."

"No?" said Flora Schuyler. "He never tried to make love to you?"

The tinge of colour grew a trifle deeper in Hetty's cheek. "Only once, and I scarcely think he meant it. It was quite a long while ago, and I told him he must never do it again."

"And since then he has tamed your horses, and bought you all the latest songs and books – good editions in English art bindings. It was Larry who sent you those flowers when we could scarcely get one?"

Hetty for some reason turned away her head. "Don't you get things of that kind?"

A trace of gravity crept into Flora Schuyler's blue eyes, which were unusually attractive ones. "When they come too often I send them back," she said. "Oh, I know I'm careless now and then, but one has to do the square thing, and I wouldn't let any man do all that for me unless I was so fond of him that I meant to marry him. Now I'm going to talk quite straight to you, Hetty. You'll have to give up Larry by and by, but if you find that's going to hurt you, send the other man away."

"You don't understand," and there was a little flash in Hetty's dark eyes. "Larry's kind to everyone – he can't help it; but he doesn't want me."

Flora Schuyler gravely patted her companion's arm. "My dear, we don't want to quarrel, but you'll be careful – to please me. Jake Cheyne is coming, and you might be sorry ever after if you

made a mistake to-night."

Hetty made no answer, and there was silence for a space while the light grew dimmer, until the sound of voices rose from without, and she felt her heart beat a trifle faster than usual, when somebody said, "Captain Cheyne!"

Then there was a rustle of draperies and Mrs. Schuyler, thin, angular, and considerably more silent than is customary with women of her race, came in, with her younger daughter and a man in her train. The latter bore the stamp of the soldier plainly, but there was a distinction in his pose that was not the result of a military training. Then as he shook hands with Flora Schuyler the fading light from the window fell upon his face, showing it clean cut from the broad forehead to the solid chin, and reposeful instead of nervously mobile. His even, low-pitched voice was also in keeping with it, for Jackson Cheyne was an unostentatious American of culture widened by travel, and, though they are not always to be found in the forefront in their own country, unless it has need of them, men of his type have little to fear from comparison with those to be met with in any other one.

He spoke when there was occasion, and was listened to, but some time had passed before he turned to Mrs. Schuyler. "I wonder if it would be too great a liberty if I asked Miss Torrance to give us some music," he said. "I am going away to-morrow to a desolate outpost in New Mexico, and it will be the last time for months that I shall have a treat of that kind."

Flora Schuyler opened the piano, and Hetty smiled at Cheyne

as she took her place; but the man made a little gesture of negation when Mrs. Schuyler would have rung for lights.

"Wouldn't it be nicer as it is?" he said.

Hetty nodded, and there was silence before the first chords rang softly through the room. Though it may have been that the absence of necessity to strive and stain her daintiness amidst the press was responsible for much, Hetty Torrance's voice had failed to win her fame; but she sang and played better than most well-trained amateurs. Thus there was no rustle of drapery or restless movements until the last low notes sank into the stillness. Then the girl glanced at the man who had unobtrusively managed to find a place close beside her.

"You know what that is?" she said.

Carolina Schuyler laughed. "Jake knows everything!"

"Yes," said the man quietly. "A nocturne. You were thinking of something when you played it."

"The sea," said Flora Schuyler, "when the moon is on it. Was that it, Hetty?"

"No," said Miss Torrance, who afterwards wondered whether it would have made a great difference if she had not chosen that nocturne. "It was the prairie when the stars are coming out over Cedar Range. Then it seems bigger and more solemn than the sea. I can see it now, wide and grey and shadowy, and so still that you feel afraid to hear yourself breathing, with the last smoky flush burning on its northern rim. Now, you may laugh at me, for you couldn't understand. When you have been born there, you

always love the prairie."

Then with a little deprecatory gesture she touched the keys again. "It will be different this time."

Cheyne glanced up sharply during the prelude, and then, feeling that the girl's eyes were upon him, nodded as out of the swelling harmonies there crept the theme. It suggested the tramp of marching feet, but there was a curious unevenness in its rhythm, and the crescendo one of the listeners looked for never came. The room was almost dark now, but none of those who sat there seemed to notice it as they listened to the listless tramp of marching feet. Then the harmonies drowned it again, and Hetty looked at Cheyne.

"Now," she said, "can you tell me what that means?"

Cheyne's voice seemed a trifle strained, as though the music had troubled him. "I know the march, but the composer never wrote what you have played to-night," he said. "It was – may mine be defended from it! – the shuffle of beaten men. How could you have felt what you put into the music?"

"No," said Hetty. "Your men could never march like that. It was footsteps going west, and I could not have originated their dragging beat. I have heard it."

There was a little silence, until Cheyne said softly, "One more."

"Then," said Hetty, "you will recognize this."

The chords rang under her fingers until they swelled into confused and conflicting harmonies that clashed and jarred upon

the theme. Their burden was strife and struggle and the anguish of strain, until at last, in the high clear note of victory, the theme rose supreme.

"Yes," said Flora Schuyler, "we know that. We heard it with the Kaiser in Berlin. Only one man could have written it; but his own countrymen could not play it better than you do. A little overwhelming. How did you get down to the spirit of it, Hetty?"

Lights were brought in just then, and they showed that the girl's face was a trifle paler than usual, as closing the piano, she turned, with a little laugh, upon the music-stool.

"Oh!" she said, "I don't quite know, and until to-night it always cheated me. I got it at the depot – no, I didn't. It was there I felt the marching, and Larry brought the prairie back to me; but I couldn't have seen what was in the last music, because it hasn't happened yet."

"It will come?" said Flora.

"Yes," said Hetty, "wherever those weary men are going to."

"And to every one of us," said Cheyne, with a curious graveness they afterwards remembered. "That is, the stress and strain – it is the triumph at the end of it only the few attain."

Once more there was silence, and it was a relief when the unemotional Mrs. Schuyler rose.

"Now," she said, and her voice, at least, had in it the twang of the country, "you young folks have been solemn quite long enough. Can't you talk something kind of lively?"

They did what they could, and – for Cheyne could on occasion

display a polished wit – light laughter filled the room, until Caroline Schuyler, perhaps not without a motive, suggested a stroll on the lawn. If there was dew upon the grass none of them heeded it, and it was but seldom anyone enjoyed the privilege of pacing that sod when Mr. Schuyler was at home. Every foot had cost him many dollars, and it remained but an imperfect imitation of an English lawn. There was on the one side a fringe of maples, and it was perhaps by Mrs. Schuyler's contrivance that eventually Hetty found herself alone with Cheyne in their deeper shadow. It was not, however, a surprise to her, for she had seen the man's desire and tacitly fallen in with it. Miss Torrance had discovered that one seldom gains anything by endeavouring to avoid the inevitable.

"Hetty," he said quietly, "I think you know why I have come to-night?"

The girl stood very still and silent for a space of seconds, and afterwards wondered whether she made the decision then, or what she had seen and heard since she entered the depot had formed it for her.

"Yes," she said slowly. "I am so sorry!"

Cheyne laid his hand upon her arm, and his voice trembled a little. "Don't be too hasty, Hetty," he said. "I would not ask you for very much just now, but I had ventured to fancy you could in time grow fond of me. I know I should have waited, but I am going away to-morrow, and I only want you to give me a promise to take away with me."

It was with a visible effort the girl lifted her head and looked at him. “I feel horribly mean, Jake, but I can’t,” she said. “I ought to have made you realize that long ago, but I liked you, and, you see, I didn’t quite know. I thought if I waited a little I might be more sure of what I felt for you!”

“Then,” said the man, a trifle hoarsely, “give me what you can now and I will be patient.”

Hetty turned half way from him and closed one hand. The man was pleasant to look upon, in character and disposition all she could desire, and she had found a curious content in his company. Had that day passed as other days had done, she might have yielded to him, but she had been stirred to the depths of her nature during the last few hours, and Flora Schuyler’s warning had been opportune. She had, as she had told him, a liking for Jackson Cheyne, but that, she saw very clearly now, was insufficient. Destiny had sent Larry Grant, with the associations that clung about him, into the depot.

“No,” she said, with a little tremble in her voice, “it wouldn’t be honest or fair to you. I am not half good enough for you.”

The man smiled somewhat mirthlessly, but his voice was reproachful. “You always speak the truth, Hetty. My dear, knowing what the best of us are, I wonder how I dared to venture to ask you to share your life with me.”

Hetty checked him with a little gesture. “Can’t you understand?” she said. “The girl who sang to you now and then isn’t me. I am selfish, discontented, and shallow, and if you hadn’t

heard me sing or play you would never have thought of me. There are people who sing divinely, and are – you see, I have met them with the mask off – just horrible."

"Hetty," said Cheyne, "I can't allow anyone to malign you, even if it's yourself, and if you have any faults, my dear, I'll take them with the rest. In fact, I would be glad of one or two. They would only bring you a little nearer to me."

The girl lifted her hand and silenced him. "Jake," she said appealingly, "please take your answer and go away. If I could only be fond of you in the right way I would, but I can't, you see. It is not my fault – it isn't in me."

The man recognized the finality in her tone, but, feeling that it was useless, made a last endeavour.

"I'm going away to-morrow," he said. "You might think differently when I come back again."

The girl's voice quivered a little. "No," she said. "I have to be straightforward now, and I know you will try to make it easier for me, even if I'm hurting you. It's no use. I shall think the same, and by and by you'll get over this fancy, and wonder what you ever saw in me."

The man smiled curiously. "I am afraid it will take me a lifetime," he said.

In another moment he had gone, and Hetty turned, a trifle flushed in face, towards the house across the lawn.

"He took it very well – and I shall never find anyone half so nice again," she said.

It was half an hour later, and Miss Torrance had recovered at least her outward serenity, when one of Mrs. Schuyler's neighbours arrived. She brought one or two young women, and a man, with her. The latter she presented to Mrs. Schuyler.

"Mr. Reginald Clavering," she said. "He's from the prairie where Miss Torrance's father lives, and is staying a day or two with us. When I heard he knew Hetty I ventured to bring him over."

Mrs. Schuyler expressed her pleasure, and – for they had gone back to the lighted room now – Hetty presently found herself seated face to face with the stranger. He was a tall, well-favoured man, slender, and lithe in movement, with dark eyes and hair, and a slightly sallow face that suggested that he was from the South. It also seemed fitting that he was immaculately dressed, for there was a curious gracefulness about him that still had in it a trace of insolence. No one would have mistaken him for a Northerner.

"It was only an hour ago I found we were so near, and I insisted upon coming across at once," he said. "You have changed a good deal since you left the prairie."

"Yes," said the girl drily. "Is it very astonishing? You see, we don't spend half our time on horseback here. You didn't expect to find me a sharp-tongued Amazon still?"

Clavering laughed as he looked at her, but the approval of what he saw was a trifle too evident in his black eyes.

"Well," he said languidly, "you were our Princess then, and there was only one of your subjects' homage you never took

kindly to. That was rough on him, because he was at least as devoted as the rest."

"That," said the girl, with a trace of acerbity, "was because he tried to patronize me. Even if I haven't the right to it, I like respect."

Clavering made a little gesture, and the deference in it was at least half sincere. "You command it, and I must try to make amends. Now, don't you want to hear about your father and the Range?"

"No," said Hetty. "I had a talk with Larry to-day."

"In New York?"

"Yes. At the depot. He is going back to-morrow. You seem astonished?"

Clavering appeared thoughtful. "Well, it's Chicago he usually goes to."

"Usually?" said Hetty. "I scarcely remember him leaving Fremont once in three years."

Clavering laughed. "Then he leaves it a good deal more often now. A man must have a little diversion when he lives as we do, and no doubt Larry feels lonely. You are here, and Heloise Durand has gone away."

Hetty understood the implication, for she had some notion how the men who spent months together in the solitude of the prairie amused themselves in the cities. Nor had she and most of her neighbours wholly approved of the liberal views held by Heloise Durand. She had, however, an unquestioning belief in

Larry, and none in the man beside her.

"I scarcely think you need have been jealous of him," she said. "Larry wasn't Miss Durand's kind, and he couldn't be lonely. Everybody was fond of him."

Clavering nodded. "Of course! Still, Larry hasn't quite so many friends lately."

"Now," said Hetty with a little flash in her eyes, "when you've told me that you have got to tell the rest. What has he been doing?"

"Ploughing!" said Clavering drily. "I did what I could to restrain him, but nobody ever could argue with Larry."

Hetty laughed, though she felt a little dismay. It was then a serious affair to drive the wheat furrow in a cattle country, and the man who did it was apt to be regarded as an iconoclast. Nevertheless, she would not show that she recognized it.

"Well," she said, "that isn't very dreadful. The plough is supreme in the Dakotas and Minnesota now. Sooner or later it has got to find a place in our country."

"Still, that's not going to happen while your father lives."

The girl realized the truth of this, but she shook her head. "We're not here to talk wheat and cattle, and I see Flo Schuyler looking at us," she said. "Go across and make yourself agreeable to the others for the honour of the prairie."

Clavering went; but he had left an unpleasant impression behind him, as he had perhaps intended, while soon after he took his departure Flora Schuyler found her friend alone.

"So you sent Jake away!" she said.

"Yes," said Hetty. "I don't know what made me, but I felt I had to. I almost meant to take him."

Flora Schuyler nodded gravely. "But it wasn't because of that man Clavering?"

"It was not," said Hetty, with a little laugh. "Don't you like him? He is rather a famous man back there on the prairie."

Flora Schuyler shook her head. "No," she said; "he reminded me of that Florentine filigree thing. It's very pretty, and I bought it for silver, but it isn't."

"You think he's that kind of man?"

"Yes," said Miss Schuyler. "I wouldn't take him at face value. The silver's all on top. I don't know what is underneath it, and would sooner somebody else found out."

III
THE CATTLE-BARONS

It was a still, hot evening when a somewhat silent company of bronze-faced men assembled in the big living room of Cedar Range. It was built of birch trunks, and had once, with its narrow windows and loopholes for rifle fire, resembled a fortalice; but now cedar panelling covered the logs, and the great double casements were filled with the finest glass. They were open wide that evening. Around this room had grown up a straggling wooden building of dressed lumber with pillars and scroll-work, and, as it stood then, flanked by its stores and stables, barns and cattle-boys' barracks, there was no homestead on a hundred leagues of prairie that might compare with it.

Outside, on the one hand, the prairie rolled away in long billowy rises, a vast sea of silvery grey, for the grass that had been green a month or two was turning white again, and here and there a stockrider showed silhouetted, a dusky mounted figure against the paling flicker of saffron that still lingered upon the horizon. On the other, a birch bluff dipped to the Cedar River, which came down faintly chilled with the Rockies' snow from the pine forests of the foothills. There was a bridge four miles away, but the river could be forded beneath the Range for a few months each year. At other seasons it swirled by, frothing in

green-stained flood, swollen by the drainage of snowfield and glacier, and there was no stockrider at the Range who dared swim his horse across.

Sun and wind had their will with the homestead, for there was little shelter from icy blizzard and scorching heat at Cedar; but though here and there the frame-boarding gaped and the roof-shingles were rent, no man accustomed to that country could fail to notice the signs of careful management and prosperity. Corrals, barns, and stables were the best of their kind; and, though the character of all of them was not beyond exception, in physique and fitness for their work it would have been hard to match the sinewy men in blue shirts, wide hats, and long boots, then watering their horses at the ford. They were as daring and irresponsible swashbucklers as ever rode out on mediæval foray, and, having once sold their allegiance to Torrance of Cedar, and recognized that he was not to be trifled with, were ready to do without compunction anything he bade them.

In the meanwhile Torrance sat at the head of the long table, with Clavering of Beauregard at his right hand. His face was bronzed and resolute, and the stamp of command sat plainly upon him. There was grey in his dark hair, and his eyes were keen and black, with a little glint in them; but, vigorous as he still seemed, the hand on the table was smooth and but slightly tinted by the sun, for Torrance was one who, in the language of that country, did his work, which was usually arduous, with his gloves on. He was dressed in white shirt and broadcloth, and a

diamond of price gleamed in the front of the former.

His guests were for the most part younger, and Clavering was scarcely half his age: but when they met in conclave something usually happened, for the seat of the legislature was far away, and their will considerably more potent thereabouts than the law of the land. Sheriff, postmaster, railroad agent, and petty politician carried out their wishes, and as yet no man had succeeded in living in that region unless he did homage to the cattle-barons. They were Republicans, admitting in the abstract the rights of man, so long as no venturesome citizen demanded too much of them; but they had discovered that in practice liberty is usually the prerogative of the strong. Still, they had done their nation good service, for they had found the land a wilderness and covered it with cattle, so that its commerce fed the railroads and supported busy wooden towns. Some of the older men had disputed possession with the Indian, and most of them in the early days, enduring thirst and loneliness and unwearying toil, had held on stubbornly in the face of ruin by frost and drought and hail. It was not astonishing that as they had made that land – so they phrased it – they regarded it as theirs.

There were eight of them present, and for a time they talked of horses and cattle as they sipped their wine, which was the choicest that France could send them; and it is also probable that no better cigars ever came from Cuba than those they smoked. By and by, however, Torrance laid his aside.

"It's time we got down to work," he said. "I sent for ten of

you, and eight have come. One sent valid excuses, and one made no answer."

"Larry Grant," said Clavering. "I guess he was too busy at the depot bringing a fat Dutchman and a crowd of hard-faced Dakota ploughboys in."

There was a little murmur of astonishment which, had the men been different, would not have been quite free from consternation, for it was significant news.

"You're quite sure?" asked Torrance, and his face was stern.

"Well," said Clavering languidly, "I saw him, and bantered him a little on his prepossessing friends. Asked him why, when he was at it, he didn't go to Manitoba for Canadians. Larry didn't take it nicely."

"I'm sorry," said one of the older men. "Larry is one of us, and the last man I'd figure on committing that kind of meanness would be the son of Fremont Grant. Quite sure it's not a fit of temper? You have not been worrying him, Torrance?"

Torrance closed one hand. "Grant of Fremont was my best friend, and when he died I 'most brought the lad up as a son. When he got hold of his foolish notions it hurt me considerably, and I did what I could to talk him out of them."

There was a little smile in the faces of some of the men, for Torrance's draconic fashion of arguing was known to them.

"You put it a little too straight, and he told you something that riled you," said one.

"He did," said Torrance grimly. "Still, for 'most two years I

kept a curb on my temper. Then one evening I told him he had to choose right then between his fancies and me. I could have no dealings with any man who talked as he did."

"Do you remember any of it?" asked another man.

"Yes," said Torrance. "His father's friends were standing in the way of progress. Land that would feed a thousand families was keeping us in luxury no American was entitled to. This was going to be the poor man's country, and the plough was bound to come!"

Clavering laughed softly, and there were traces of ironical amusement in the faces of the rest. Very similar predictions had more than once been flung at them, and their possessions were still, they fancied, secure to them. They, however, became grave again, and it was evident that Larry Grant had hitherto been esteemed by them.

"If it had been any one else, we could have put our thumb on him right now," said one. "Still, I don't quite figure it would work with Larry. There are too many folks who would stand in with him."

There was a little murmur of approbation, and Clavering laughed. "Buy him off," he said tentatively. "We have laid out a few thousand dollars in that way before."

Some of the men made gestures of decided negation, and Torrance looked at the speaker a trifle sternly.

"No, sir," he said. "Larry may be foolish, but he's one of us."

"Then," said somebody, "we've got to give him time. Let it

pass. You have something to tell us, Torrance?"

Torrance signed to one of them. "You had better tell them, Allonby."

A grey-haired man stood up, and his fingers shook a little on the table. "My lease has fallen in, and the Bureau will not renew it," he said. "I'm not going to moan about my wrongs, but some of you know what it cost me to break in that place of mine. You have lived on the bitter water and the saleratus bread, but none of you has seen his wife die for the want of the few things he couldn't give her, as I did. I gave the nation my two boys when the good times came, and they're dead – buried in their uniform both of them – and now, when I'd laid out my last dollar on the ranch, that the one girl I've left me might have something when I'd gone, the Government will take it away from me. Gentlemen, is it my duty to sit down quietly?"

There was a murmur, and the men looked at one another with an ominous question in their eyes, until Torrance raised his hand.

"The land's not open to location. I guess they're afraid of us, and Allonby's there on toleration yet," he said. "Gentlemen, we mean to keep him just where he is, because when he pulls out we will have to go too. But this thing has to be done quietly. When the official machinery moves down here it's because we pull the strings, and we have got to have the law upon our side as far as we can. Well, that's going to cost us money, and we want a campaign fund. I'll give Allonby a cheque for five hundred dollars in the meanwhile, if he'll be treasurer; but as we may all be fixed as he

is presently, we'll want a good deal more before we're through. Who will follow me?"

Each of them promised five hundred, and then looked at Clavering, who had not spoken. One of them also fancied that there was for a moment a trace of embarrassment in his face; but he smiled carelessly.

"The fact is, dollars are rather tight with me just now," he said. "You'll have to wait a little if I'm to do as much as the rest of you. I am, however, quite willing."

"I'll lend you them," said Torrance. "Allonby, I'll make that cheque a thousand. You have got it down?"

Allonby accepted office, and one of the other men rose up. "Now it seems to me that Torrance is right, and with our leases expired or running out, we're all in the same tight place," he said. "The first move is to get every man holding cattle land from here to the barren country to stand in, and then, one way or another, we'll freeze out the homesteaders. Well, then, we'll constitute ourselves a committee, with Torrance as head executive, and as we want to know just what the others are doing, my notion is that he should start off to-morrow and ride round the country. If there are any organizations ready, it might suit us to affiliate with them."

It was agreed to, and Clavering said, "It seems to me, sir, that the first question is, 'Could we depend upon the boys if we wanted them?'"

Torrance strode to an open window and blew a silver whistle.

Its shrill note had scarcely died away when a mounted man came up at a gallop, and a band of others in haste on foot. They stopped in front of the window, picturesque in blue shirts and long boots, sinewy, generously fed, and irresponsibly daring.

"Boys," he said, "you've been told there's a change coming, and by and by this country will have no more use for you. Now, if any folks came here and pulled our boundaries up to let the mean whites from back east in, what are you going to do?"

There was a burst of hoarse laughter. "Ride them down," said one retainer, with the soft blue eyes of a girl and a figure of almost matchless symmetry.

"Grow feathers on them," said another. "Ride them back to the railroad on a rail."

"I scarcely think that would be necessary," said Torrance quietly. "Still, you'd stand behind the men who pay you?"

There was a murmur that expressed a good deal, though it was inarticulate, and a man stood forward.

"You've heard them, sir," he said. "Well, we'll do just what you want us to. This is the cattle-baron's country, and we're here. It's good enough for us, and if it means lots of trouble we're going to stay here."

Torrance raised his hand, and when the men moved away turned with a little grim smile to his guests. "They'll be quite as good as their word," he said.

Then he led them back to the table, and when the decanter had gone round, one of the younger men stood up.

"We want a constitution, gentlemen, and I'll give you one," he said. "The Cedar District Stockraisers' Committee incorporated to-day with for sole object the defence of our rights as American citizens!"

Clavering rose with the others, but there was a little ironical smile in his eyes as he said, "If necessary against any unlawful encroachments made by the legislature!"

Torrance turned upon him sternly. "No, sir!" he said. "By whatever means may appear expedient!"

The glasses were lifted high, and when they had laid them down the men rode away, though only one or two of them realized the momentous issues which they and others had raised at about much the same time. They had not, however, met in conclave too soon, for any step that man makes forward towards a wider life is usually marked by strife, and the shadow of coming trouble was already upon the land. It had deepened little by little, and the cattle-barons had closed their eyes, as other men who have held the reins have done since the beginning, until the lean hands of the toilers fastened upon them, and fresh horrors added to an ancient wrong were the price of liberty that was lost again. They had done good service to their nation, with profit to themselves, and would not see that the times were changing and that the nation had no longer need of them.

Other men, however, at least suspected it, and there was an expectant gathering one hot afternoon in the railroad depot of a little wooden town where Grant stood waiting for the west-

bound train. There was little to please the eye about the station, and still less about the town. Straight out of the great white levels ran the glistening track, and an unsightly building of wood and iron rose from the side of it, flanked by a towering water-tank. A pump rattled under it, and the smell of creosote was everywhere. Cattle corrals ran back from the track, and beyond them sun-rent frame houses roofed with cedar shingles straggled away on the one hand, paintless, crude, and square. On the other, a smear of trail led the dazzled vision back across the parched levels to the glancing refraction on the horizon, and the figure of a single horseman showing dimly through a dust cloud emphasized their loneliness. The town was hot and dusty, its one green fringe of willows defiled by the garbage the citizens deposited there, and the most lenient stranger could have seen no grace or beauty in it. Yet, like many another place of the kind, it was destined to rise to prosperity and fame.

The depot was thronged that afternoon. Store and hotel keeper, citizens in white shirts and broadcloth, jostled blue-shirted cattle men, while here and there a petty politician consulted with the representative of a Western paper. The smoke of cigars drifted everywhere, and the listless heat was stirred by the hum of voices eager and strident. It was evident that the assembly was in an expectant mood, and there was a murmur of approbation when one newspaper man laid hold of Grant.

"I couldn't light on you earlier, but ten minutes will see us through," he said. "We'll make a half-page of it if you'll let me

have your views. New epoch in the country's history! The small farmer the coming king! A wood-cut of the man who brought the first plough in."

Larry Grant laughed a little. "There are quite a few ahead of me, and if you spread my views the barons would put their thumb on you and squeeze you flat," he said. "On the other hand, it wouldn't suit me if you sent them anything I told you to publish."

The man appeared a trifle embarrassed. "The rights of the Press are sacred in a free country, sir," he said.

"Well," said Grant drily, "although I hope it will be, this country isn't quite free yet. I surmise that you don't know that the office of your contemporary farther east was broken into a few hours ago, and an article written by a friend of mine pulled out of the press. The proprietor was quietly held down upon the floor when he objected. You will hear whether I am right or wrong to-morrow."

What the man would have answered did not appear, for just then somebody shouted, and a trail of smoke swept up above the rim of the prairie. It rose higher and whiter, something that flashed dazzlingly grew into shape beneath it, and there was a curious silence when the dusty cars rolled into the little station. It was followed by a murmur as an elderly man in broad white hat and plain store clothing, and a plump, blue-eyed young woman, came out upon the platform of a car. He wore a pair of spectacles and gazed about him in placid inquiry, until Grant stepped forward. Then he helped the young woman down, and

held out a big, hard hand.

"Mr. Grant?" he said.

Grant nodded, and raised his hat to the girl. "Yes," he said. "Mr. Muller?"

"Ja," said the other man. "Also der fräulein Muller."

There was a little ironical laughter from the crowd. "A Dutchman," said somebody, "from Chicago. They raise them there in the sausage machine. The hogs go in at one end, and they rake the Dutchmen out of the other."

Muller looked round inquiringly, but apparently failed to discover the speaker.

"Dot," he said, "is der chestnut. I him have heard before."

There was good-humoured laughter – for even when it has an animus an American crowd is usually fair; and in the meanwhile five or six other men got down from a car. They were lean and brown, with somewhat grim faces, and were dressed in blue shirts and jean.

"Well," said one of them, "we're Americans. Got any objections to us getting off here, boys?"

Some of the men in store clothing nodded a greeting, but there were others in wide hats, and long boots with spurs, who jeered.

"Brought your plough-cows along?" said one, and the taunt had its meaning, for it is usually only the indigent and incapable who plough with oxen.

"No," said one of the newcomers. "We have horses back yonder. When we want mules or cowsteerers, I guess we'll find

them here. You seem to have quite a few of them around."

A man stepped forward, jingling his spurs, with his jacket of embroidered deerskin flung open to show, though this was as yet unusual, that he wore a bandolier. Rolling back one loose sleeve he displayed a brown arm with the letters "C. R." tattooed within a garter upon it. "See this. You've heard of that mark before?" he said.

"Cash required!" said the newcomer, with a grin. "Well, I guess that's not astonishing. It would be a blame foolish man who gave you credit."

"No, sir," said the stockrider. "It's Cedar Range, and there's twenty boys and more cattle than you could count in a long day carrying that brand. It will be a cold day when you and the rest of the Dakotas start kicking against that outfit."

There was laughter and acclamation, in the midst of which the cars rolled on; but in the meanwhile Grant had seized the opportunity to get a gang-plough previously unloaded from a freight-car into a wagon. The sight of it raised a demonstration, and there were hoots, and cries of approbation, while a man with a flushed face was hoisted to the top of a kerosene-barrel.

"Boys," he said, "there's no use howling. We're Americans. Nobody can stop us, and we're going on. You might as well kick against a railroad; and because the plough and the small farmer will do more for you than even the locomotive did, they have got to come. Well, now, some of you are keeping stores, and one or two I see here baking bread and making clothes. Which is going

to do the most for your trade and you, a handful of rich men, who wouldn't eat or wear the things you have to sell, owning the whole country, or a family farming on every quarter section? A town ten times this size wouldn't be much use to them. Well, you've had your cattle-barons, gentlemen most of them; but even a man of that kind has to step out of the track and make room when the nation's moving on."

He probably said more, but Grant did not hear him, for he had as unostentatiously as possible conveyed Muller and the fräulein into a wagon, and had horses led up for the Dakota men. They had some difficulty in mounting, and the crowd laughed good-humouredly, though here and there a man flung jibes at them; while one, jolting in his saddle as his broncho reared, turned to Grant with a little deprecatory gesture.

"In our country we mostly drive in wagons, but I'll ride by the stirrup and get down when nobody sees me," he said. "The beast wouldn't try to climb out this way if there wasn't something kind of prickly under his saddle."

Grant's face was a trifle grim when he saw that more of the horses were inclined to behave similarly, but he flicked his team with the whip, and there was cheering and derision when, with a drumming of hoofs and rattle of wheels, wagons and horsemen swept away into the dust-cloud that rolled about the trail.

"This," he said, "is only a little joke of theirs, and they'll go a good deal further when they get their blood up. Still, I tried to warn you what you might expect."

"So!" said Muller, with a placid grin. "It is noding to der *franc tireurs*. I was in der chase of Menotti among der Vosges. Also at Paris."

"Well," said Grant drily, "I'm 'most afraid that by and by you'll go through very much the same kind of thing again. What you saw at the depot is going on wherever the railroad is bringing the farmers in, and we've got men in this country who'd make first-grade *franc tireurs*."

IV
MULLER STANDS FAST

The windows of Fremont homestead were open wide, and Larry Grant sat by one of them in a state of quiet contentment after a long day's ride. Outside, the prairie, fading from grey to purple, ran back to the dusky east, and the little cool breeze that came up out of the silence and flowed into the room had in it the qualities of snow-chilled wine. A star hung low to the westward in a field of palest green, and a shaded lamp burned dimly at one end of the great bare room.

By it the Fräulein Muller, flaxen-haired, plump, and blue-eyed, sat knitting, and Larry's eyes grew a trifle wistful when he glanced at her. It was a very long while since any woman had crossed his threshold, and the red-cheeked fräulein gave the comfortless bachelor dwelling a curiously homelike appearance. Nevertheless, it was not the recollection of its usual dreariness that called up the sigh, for Larry Grant had had his dreams like other men, and Miss Muller was not the woman he had now and then daringly pictured sitting there. Her father, perhaps from force of habit, sat with a big meerschaum in hand, by the empty stove, and if his face expressed anything at all it was phlegmatic content. Opposite him sat Breckenridge, a young Englishman, lately arrived from Minnesota.

"What do you think of the land, now you've seen it?" asked Grant.

Muller nodded reflectively. "Der land is good. It is der first-grade hard wheat she will grow. I three hundred and twenty acres buy."

"Well," said Grant, "I'm willing to let you have it; but I usually try to do the square thing, and you may have trouble before you get your first crop in."

"Und," said Muller, "so you want to sell?"

Grant laughed. "Not quite; and I can't sell that land outright. I'll let it to you while my lease runs, and when that falls in you'll have the same right to homestead a quarter or half section for nothing as any other man. In the meanwhile, I and one or two others are going to start wheat-growing on land that is ours outright, and take our share of the trouble."

"Ja," said Muller, "but dere is much dot is not clear to me. Why you der trouble like?"

"Well," said Grant, "as I've tried to tell you, it works out very much like this. It was known that this land was specially adapted to mixed farming quite a few years ago, but the men who ran their cattle over it never drove a plough. You want to know why? Well, I guess it was for much the same reason that an association of our big manufacturers bought up the patents of an improved process, and for a long while never made an ounce of material under them, or let any one else try. We had to pay more than it was worth for an inferior article that hampered some of the most

important industries in the country, and they piled up the dollars in the old-time way."

"Und," said Muller, "dot is democratic America!"

"Yes," said Grant. "That is the America we mean to alter. Well, where one man feeds his cattle, fifty could plough and make a living raising stock on a smaller scale, and the time's quite close upon us when they will; but the cattle-men have got the country, and it will hurt them to let go. It's not their land, and was only lent them. Now I'm no fonder of trouble than any other man, but this country fed and taught me, and kept me two years in Europe looking round, and I'd feel mean if I took everything and gave it nothing back. Muller will understand me. Do you, Breckenridge?"

The English lad laughed. "Oh, yes; though I don't know that any similar obligation was laid on myself. The country I came from had apparently no use for a younger son at all, and it was kicks and snubs it usually bestowed on me; but if there's a row on hand I'm quite willing to stand by you and see it through. My folks will, however, be mildly astonished when they hear I've turned reformer."

Grant nodded good-humouredly, for he was not a fanatic, but an American with a firm belief in the greatness of his country's destiny, who, however, realized that faith alone was scarcely sufficient.

"Well," he said, "if it's trouble you're anxious for, it's quite likely you'll find it here. Nobody ever got anything worth having

unless he fought for it, and we've taken on a tolerably big contract. We're going to open up this state for any man who will work for it to make a living in, and substitute its constitution for the law of the cattle-barons."

"Der progress," said Muller, "she is irresistible."

Breckenridge laughed. "From what I was taught, it seems to me that she moves round in rings. You start with the luxury of the few, oppression, and brutality, then comes revolution, and worse things than you had before, progress growing out of it that lasts for a few generations until the few fittest get more than their fair share of wealth and control, and you come back to the same point again."

Muller shook his head. "No," he said, "it is nod der ring, but der elastic spiral. Der progress she march, it is true, round und round, but she is arrive always der one turn higher, und der pressure on der volute is nod constant."

"On the top?" said Breckenridge. "Principalities and powers, traditional and aristocratic, or monetary. Well, it seems to me they squeeze progress down tolerably flat between them occasionally. Take our old cathedral cities and some of your German ones, and, if you demand it, I'll throw their ghettos in. Then put the New York tenements or most of the smaller western towns beside them, and see what you've arrived at."

"No," said Muller tranquilly. "Weight above she is necessary while der civilization is incomblete, but der force is from der bottom. It is all time positive and primitive, for it was make when

man was make at der beginning."

Grant nodded. "Well," he said, "our work's waiting right here. What other men have done in the Dakotas and Minnesota we are going to do. Nature has been storing us food for the wheat plant for thousands of years, and there's more gold in our black soil than was ever dug out of Mexico or California. Still, you have to get it out by ploughing, and not by making theories. Breckenridge, you will stay with me; but you'll want a house to live in, Muller."

Muller drew a roll of papers out of his pocket, and Grant, who took them from him, stared in wonder. They were drawings and calculations relating to building with undressed lumber, made with Teutonic precision and accuracy.

"I have," said Muller, "der observation make how you build der homestead in this country."

"Then we'll start you in to-morrow," said Grant. "You'll get all the lumber you want in the birch bluff, and I'll lend you one or two of the boys I brought in from Michigan. There's nobody on this continent handier with the axe."

Muller nodded and refilled his pipe, and save for the click of the fräulein's needles there was once more silence in the bare room. She had not spoken, for the knitting and the baking were her share, and the men whose part was the conflict must be clothed and fed. They knew it could not be evaded, and, springing from the same colonizing stock, placid Teuton with his visions and precision in everyday details, eager American,

and adventurous Englishman, each made ready for it in his own fashion. Free as yet from passion, or desire for fame, they were willing to take up the burden that was to be laid upon them; but only the one who knew the least awaited it joyously. Others had also the same thoughts up and down that lonely land, and the dusty cars were already bringing the vanguard of the homeless host in. They were for the most part quiet and resolute men, who asked no more than leave to till a few acres of the wilderness, and to eat what they had sown; but there were among them others of a different kind – fanatics, outcasts, men with wrongs – and behind them the human vultures who fatten on rapine. As yet, the latter found no occupation waiting them, but their sight was keen, and they knew their time would come.

It was a week later, and a hot afternoon, when Muller laid the big crosscut saw down on the log he was severing and slowly straightened his back. Then he stood up, red and very damp in face, a burly, square-shouldered man, and, having mislaid his spectacles, blinked about him. On three sides of him the prairie, swelling in billowy rises, ran back to the horizon; but on the fourth a dusky wall of foliage followed the crest of a ravine, and the murmur of water came up faintly from the creek in the hollow. Between himself and its slender birches lay piled amidst the parched and dusty grass, and the first courses of a wooden building, rank with the smell of sappy timber, already stood in front of him. There was no notch in the framing that had not been made and pinned with an exact precision. In its scanty shadow

his daughter sat knitting beside a smouldering fire over which somebody had suspended a big blackened kettle. The crash of the last falling trunk had died away, and there was silence in the bluff; but a drumming of hoofs rose in a sharp staccato from the prairie.

"Now," said Muller quietly, "I think the *chasseurs* come."

The girl looked up a moment, noticed the four mounted figures that swung over the crest of a rise, and then went on with her knitting again. Still, there was for a second a little flash in her pale blue eyes.

The horsemen came on, the dust floating in long wisps behind them, until, with a jingle of bridle and stirrup, they pulled up before the building. Three of them were bronzed and dusty, in weather-stained blue shirts, wide hats, and knee-boots that fitted them like gloves; and there was ironical amusement in their faces. Each sat his horse as if he had never known any other seat than the saddle; but the fourth was different from the rest. He wore a jacket of richly embroidered deerskin, and the shirt under it was white; while he sat with one hand in a big leather glove resting on his hip. His face was sallow and his eyes were dark.

"Hallo, Hamburg!" he said, and his voice had a little commanding ring. "You seem kind of busy."

Muller blinked at him. He had apparently not yet found his spectacles, but he had in the meanwhile come upon his axe, and now stood very straight, with the long haft reaching to his waist.

"Ja," he said. "Mine house I build."

"Well," said the man in the embroidered jacket, "I fancy you're wasting time. Asked anybody's leave to cut that lumber, or put it up?"

"Mine friend," said Muller, smiling, "when it is nod necessary I ask nodings of any man."

"Then," said the horseman drily, as he turned to his companions, "I fancy that's where you're wrong. Boys, we'll take him along in case Torrance would like to see him. I guess you'll have to walk home, Jim."

A man dismounted and led forward his horse with a wrench upon the bridle that sent it plunging. "Get your foot in the stirrup, Hamburg, and I'll hoist you up," he said.

Muller stood motionless, and the horseman in deerskin glancing round in his direction saw his daughter for the first time. He laughed; but there was something in his black eyes that caused the Teuton's fingers to close a trifle upon the haft of the axe.

"You'll have to get down, Charlie, as well as Jim," he said. "Torrance has his notions, or Coyote might have carried Miss Hamburg that far as well. Sorry to hurry you, Hamburg, but I don't like waiting."

Muller stepped back a pace, and the axe-head flashed as he moved his hand; while, dazzled by the beam it cast, the half-tamed broncho rose with hoofs in the air. Its owner smote it on the nostrils with his fist, and the pair sidled round each other – the man with his arm drawn back, the beast with laid-back ears – for almost a minute before they came to a standstill.

"Mine friend," said Muller, "other day I der pleasure have. I mine house have to build."

"Get up," said the stockrider. "Ever seen anybody fire off a gun?"

Muller laughed softly, and glanced at the leader. "Der rifle," he said drily. "I was at Sedan. To-day it is not convenient that I come."

"Hoist him up!" said the leader, and once more, while the other man moved forward, Muller stepped back; but this time there was an answering flash in his blue eyes as the big axe-head flashed in the sun.

"I guess we'd better hold on," said another man. "Look there, Mr. Clavering."

He pointed to the bluff, and the leader's face darkened as he gazed, for four men with axes were running down the slope, and they were lean and wiry, with very grim faces. They were also apparently small farmers or lumbermen from the bush of Michigan, and Clavering knew such men usually possessed a terrible proficiency with the keen-edged weapon, and stubbornness was native in them. Two others, one of whom he knew, came behind them. The foremost stopped, and stood silent when the man Clavering recognized signed to them, but not before each had posted himself strategically within reach of a horseman's bridle.

"You might explain, Clavering, what you and your cow-boys are doing here," he said.

Clavering laughed. “We are going to take your Teutonic friend up to the Range. He is cutting our fuel timber with nobody’s permission.”

“No,” said Grant drily; “he has mine. The bluff is on my run.”

“Did you take out timber rights with your lease?” asked Clavering.

“No, I hadn’t much use for them. None of my neighbours hold any either. But the bluff is big enough, and I’ve no objection to their cutting what billets they want. Still, I can’t have them driving out any other friends of mine.”

Clavering smiled ironically. “You have been picking up some curious acquaintances, Larry; but don’t you think you had better leave this thing to Torrance? The fact is, the cattle-men are not disposed to encourage strangers building houses in their country just now.”

“I had a notion it belonged to this State. It’s not an unusual one,” said Grant.

Clavering shrugged his shoulders. “Of course, it sounds better that way. Have it so. Still, it will scarcely pay you to make yourself unpopular with us, Larry.”

“Well,” said Grant drily, “it seems to me I’m tolerably unpopular already. But that’s not quite the point. Take your boys away.”

Clavering flung his hand up in half-ironical salutation, but as he was about to wheel his horse a young Englishman whose nationality was plainly stamped upon him seized his bridle.

"Not quite so fast!" he said. "It would be more fitting if you got down and expressed your regrets to the fräulein. You haven't heard Muller's story yet, Larry."

"Let go," said Clavering, raising the switch he held. "Drop my bridle or take care of yourself!"

"Come down," said Breckenridge.

The switch went up and descended hissing upon part of an averted face; but the lad sprang as it fell, and the next moment the horse rose almost upright with two men clinging to it; one of them, whose sallow cheeks were livid now, swaying in the saddle. Then Grant grasped the bridle that fell from the rider's hands, and hurled his comrade backwards, while some of the stockriders pushed their horses nearer, and the axe-men closed in about them.

Hoarse cries went up. "Horses back! Pull him off! Give the Britisher a show! Leave them to it!"

It was evident that a blunder would have unpleasant results, for Clavering, with switch raised, had tightened his left hand on the bridle Grant had loosed again, while a wicked smile crept into his eyes, and the lad stood tense and still, with hands clenched in front of him, and a weal on his young face. Grant, however, stepped in between them.

"We've had sufficient fooling, Breckenridge," he said. "Clavering, I'll give you a minute to get your men away, and if you can't do it in that time you'll take the consequences."

Clavering wheeled his horse. "The odds are with you, Larry,"

he said. “You have made a big blunder, but I guess you know your own business best.”

He nodded, including the fräulein, with an easy insolence that yet became him, touched the horse with his heel, and in another moment he and his cow-boys were swinging at a gallop across the prairie. Then, as they dipped behind a rise, those who were left glanced at one another. Breckenridge was very pale, and one of his hands was bleeding where Clavering’s spur had torn it.

“It seems that we have made a beginning,” he said hoarsely. “It’s first blood to them, but this will take a lot of forgetting, and the rest may be different.”

Grant made no answer, but turned and looked at Muller, who stood very straight and square, with a curious brightness in his eyes.

“Are you going on with the contract? There is the girl to consider,” said Grant.

“Ja,” said the Teuton. “I was in der Vosges, and der girl is also Fräulein Muller.”

“Boys,” said Grant to the men from Michigan, “you have seen what’s in front of you, and you’ll probably have to use more than axes before you’re through. Still, you have the chance of clearing out right now. I only want willing men behind me.”

One of the big axe-men laughed scornfully, and there was a little sardonic grin in the faces of the rest.

“There’s more room for us here than there was in Michigan, and now we’ve got our foot down here we’re not going back

again," he said. "That's about all there is to it. But when our time comes, the other men aren't going to find us slacker than the Dutchman."

Grant nodded gravely. "Well," he said very simply, "I guess the Lord who made this country will know who's in the right and help them. They'll need it. There's a big fight coming."

Then they went back to their hewing in the bluff, and the Fräulein Muller went on with her knitting.

V
HETTY COMES HOME

It was an afternoon of the Indian summer, sunny and cool, and the maples about the Schuyler villa flamed gold and crimson against a sky of softest blue, when Hetty Torrance sat reflectively silent on the lawn. Flora Schuyler sat near her, with a book upside down upon her knee.

"You have been worrying about something the last few weeks," she said.

"Is that quite unusual?" asked Hetty. "Haven't a good many folks to worry all the time?"

Flora Schuyler smiled. "Just finding it out, Hetty? Well, I have noticed a change, and it began the day you waited for us at the depot. And it wasn't because of Jake Cheyne."

"No," said Hetty reflectively. "I suppose it should have been. Have you heard from him since he went away?"

"Lily Cheyne had a letter with some photographs, and she showed it to me. It's a desolate place in the sage bush he's living in, and there's not a white man, except the boys he can't talk to, within miles of him, while from the picture I saw of his adobe room I scarcely think folks would have it down here to keep hogs in. Jake Cheyne was fastidious, too, and there was a forced cheerfulness about his letter which had its meaning, though, of

course, he never mentioned you."

Hetty flushed a trifle. "Flo, I'm sorry. Still, you can't blame me."

"No," said Miss Schuyler, "though there was a time when I wished I could. You can't help being pretty, but it ought to make you careful when you see another of them going that way again."

Hetty made a little impatient gesture. "If there ever is another, he'll be pulled up quite sharp. You don't think their foolishness, which spoils everything, is any pleasure to me. It's too humiliating. Can't one be friends with a nice man without falling in love with him?"

"Well," said Miss Schuyler drily, "it depends a good deal on how you're made; but it's generally risky for one or the other. Still, perhaps you might, for I have a fancy there's something short in you. Now, I'm going to ask you a question. Is it thinking of the other man that has made you restless? I mean the one we saw at the depot?"

Hetty laughed outright. "Larry? Why, as I tried to tell you, he has always been just like a cousin or a brother to me, and doesn't want anything but his horses and cattle and his books on political economy. Larry's quite happy with his ranching, and his dreams of the new America. Of course, they'll never come to anything; but when you can start him talking they're quite nice to listen to."

Flora Schuyler shook her head. "I wouldn't be too sure. That man is in earnest, and the dreams of an earnest American have a way of coming true. You have known him a long while, and

I've only seen him once, but that man will do more than talk if he ever has the opportunity. He has the quiet grit one finds in the best of us – not the kind that make the speeches – and some Englishmen, in him. You can see it in his eyes."

"Then," said Hetty, with a little laugh, "come back with me to Cedar, and if you're good you shall have him. It isn't everybody I'd give Larry to."

There was a trace of indignation in Flora Schuyler's face. "I fancy he would not appreciate your generosity, and there's a good deal you have got to find out, Hetty," she said drily. "It may hurt you when you do. But you haven't told me yet what has been worrying you."

"No," said Hetty, with a little wistful smile. "Well, I'm going to. It's hard to own to, but I'm a failure. I fancied I could make everybody listen to my singing, and I would come here. Well, I came, and found out that my voice would never bring me fame, and for a time it hurt me horribly. Still, I couldn't go back just then, and when you and your mother pressed me I stayed. I knew what you expected, and I disappointed you. Perhaps I was too fastidious, but there were none of them that really pleased me. Then I began to see that I was only spoiling nicer girls' chances and trying the patience of everybody."

"Hetty!" said Flora Schuyler, but Miss Torrance checked her.

"Wait until I'm through. Then it became plain to me that while I'd been wasting my time here the work I was meant for was waiting at Cedar. The old man who gave me everything is very

lonely there, and he and Larry have been toiling on while I flung 'most what a ranch would cost away on lessons and dresses and fripperies, which will never be any good to me. Still, I'm an American, too, and now, when there's trouble coming, I'm going back to the place I belong to."

"You are doing the right thing now," said Flora Schuyler.

Hetty smiled somewhat mirthlessly. "Well," she said, "because it's hard, I guess I am; but there's one thing would make it easier. You will come and stay with me. You don't know how much I want you; and New York in winter doesn't suit you. You're pale already. Come and try our clear, dry cold."

Eventually Miss Schuyler promised, and Hetty rose. "Then it's fixed," she said. "I'll write the old man a dutiful letter now, while I feel like doing it well."

The letter was duly written, and, as it happened, reached Torrance as he sat alone one evening in his great bare room at Cedar Range. Among the papers on the table in front of him were letters from the cattle-men's committees, which had sprung into existence every here and there, and Torrance apparently did not find them reassuring, for there was care in his face. It had become evident that the big ranchers' rights were mostly traditional, and already, in scattered detachments, the vanguard of the homesteaders' host was filing in. Here and there they had made their footing good; more often, by means not wholly constitutional, their outposts had been driven in; but it was noticeable that Torrance and his neighbours still believed them

no more than detachments, and had not heard the footsteps of the rest. Three years' residence in that land had changed the aliens into American citizens, but a lifetime of prosperity could scarcely efface the bitterness they had brought with them from the east, while some, in spite of their crude socialistic aspirations, were drilled men who had herded the imperial legions like driven cattle into Sedan. More of native birth, helots of the cities, and hired hands of the plains, were also turning desiring eyes upon the wide spaces of the cattle country, where there was room for all.

Torrance opened his letter and smiled somewhat drily. It was affectionate and not without its faint pathos, for Hetty had been stirred when she wrote; but the grim old widower felt no great desire for the gentle attentions of a dutiful daughter just then.

"We shall be at Cedar soon after you get this," he read among the rest. "I know if I had told you earlier you would have protested you didn't want me, just because you foolishly fancied I should be lonely at the Range; but I have been very selfish, and you must have been horribly lonely too; and one of the nicest girls you ever saw is coming to amuse you. You can't help liking Flo. Of course I had to bring a maid; but you will have to make the best of us, because you couldn't stop us now if you wanted to."

It was noticeable that Torrance took the pains to confirm this fact by reference to a railroad schedule, and, finding it incontrovertible, shook his head.

"Three of them," he said.

Then he sat still with the letter in his hand, while a trace of

tenderness crept into his face, which, however, grew grave again, until there was a tapping at the door, and Clavering came in.

"You seem a trifle worried, sir, and if you're busy I needn't keep you long," he said. "I just wanted to hand you a cheque for the subscription you paid for me."

"Sit down," said Torrance. "Where did you get the dollars from?"

Clavering appeared almost uneasy for a moment, but he laughed. "I've been thinning out my cattle."

"That's not a policy I approve of just now. We'll have the rabble down upon us as soon as we show any sign of weakening."

Clavering made a little deprecatory gesture. "It wasn't a question of policy. I had to have the dollars. Still, you haven't told me if you have heard anything unpleasant from the other committees."

Torrance appeared thoughtful. He suspected that Clavering's ranch was embarrassed, and the explanation was plausible.

"No," he said. "It was something else. Hetty is on her way home, and she is bringing another young woman and a maid with her. They will be here before I can stop them. Still, I could, if it was necessary, send them back."

Clavering did not answer for a moment, though Torrance saw the faint gleam in his dark eyes, and watched him narrowly. Then he said, "You will find a change in Miss Torrance, sir. She has grown into a beautiful young woman, and has, I fancy, been taught to think for herself in the city; you could not expect her

to come back as she left the prairie. And if anything has induced her to decide that her place is here, she will probably stay."

"You're not quite plain. What could induce her?"

Clavering smiled, though he saw that the shot had told. "It was astonishing that Miss Torrance did not honour me with her confidence. A sense of duty, perhaps, although one notices that the motives of young women are usually a trifle involved. It, however, appears to me that if Miss Torrance makes up her mind to stay, we are still quite capable of guarding our women from anxiety or molestation."

"Yes," said Torrance grimly. "Of course. Still, we may have to do things we would sooner they didn't hear about or see. Well, you have some news?"

Clavering nodded. "I was in at the railroad, and fifty Dakota men came in on the cars. I went round to the hotel with the committee, and, though it cost some dollars to fix the thing, they wouldn't take them in. The boys, who got kind of savage, found a pole and drove the door in, but we turned the Sheriff, who had already sworn some of us in, loose on them. Four or five men were nastily clubbed, and one of James's boys was shot through the arm, while I have a fancy that the citizens would have stood in with the other crowd; but seeing they were not going to get anything to eat there, they held up a store, and as we told the man who kept it how their friends had sacked Regent, he fired at them. The consequence is that the Sheriff has some of them in jail, and the rest are camped down on the prairie. We hold

the town."

"Through the Sheriff?"

Clavering laughed. "He'll earn his pay. Has it struck you that this campaign is going to cost us a good deal? Allonby hasn't much left in hand already."

"Oh, yes," said the older man, with a little grim smile. "If it's wanted I'll throw my last dollar in. Beaten now and we're beaten for ever. We have got to win."

Clavering said nothing further, though he realized, perhaps more clearly than his leader, that it was only by the downfall of the cattle-men the small farmer could establish himself, and, when he had handed a cheque to Torrance, went out.

It was three days later when Hetty Torrance rose from her seat in a big vestibule car as the long train slackened speed outside a little Western station. She laughed as she swept her glance round the car.

"Look at it, Flo," she said; "gilding and velvet and nickel, all quite in keeping with the luxury of the East. You are environed by civilization still; but once you step off the platform there will be a difference."

Flora Schuyler, who noticed the little flush in her companion's face, glanced out of the dusty window, for the interior of the gently-rocking car, with its lavish decoration and upholstery, was not new to her, and the first thing that caught her eye was the miscellaneous deposit of rubbish, old boots, and discarded clothing, amidst the willows that slowly flitted by. Then she saw a

towering water-tank, wooden houses that rose through a haze of blowing dust, hideous in their unadornment, against a crystalline sky, and a row of close-packed stock-cars which announced that they were in the station.

It seemed to be thronged with the populace, and there was a murmur, apparently of disappointed expectancy, when, as the cars stopped, the three women alone appeared on the platform. Then there was a shout for the conductor, and somebody said, "You've no rustlers aboard for us?"

"No," said the grinning official who leaned out from the door of the baggage-car. "The next crowd are waiting until they can buy rifles to whip you with."

Hoarse laughter followed, and somebody said, "Boys, your friends aren't coming. You can take your band home again."

Then out of the clamour came the roll of a drum, and, clear and musical, the ringing of bugles blown by men who had marched with Grant and Sherman when they were young. The effect was stirring, and a cheer went up, for there were other men present in whom the spirit which, underlying immediate issues, had roused the North to arms was living yet; but it broke off into laughter when, one by one, discordant instruments and beaten pans joined in. The din, however, ceased suddenly, when somebody said, "Hadn't you better let up, boys, or Torrance will figure you sent the band for him?"

Miss Schuyler appeared a trifle bewildered, the maid frightened; but Hetty's cheeks were glowing.

"Flo," she said, "aren't you glad you came? The boys are taking the trail. We'll show you how we stir the prairie up by and by!"

Miss Schuyler was very doubtful as to whether the prospect afforded her any pleasure; but just then a grey-haired man, dressed immaculately in white shirt and city clothes, kissed her companion, and then, taking off his hat, handed her down from the platform with ceremonious courtesy. He had a grim, forceful face, with pride and command in it, and Miss Schuyler, who felt half afraid of him then, never quite overcame the feeling. She noticed, however, that he paid equal attention to the terrified maid.

"It would be a duty to do our best for any of Hetty's friends who have been so kind to her in the city, but in this case it's going to be a privilege, too," he said. "Well, you will be tired, and they have a meal waiting you at the hotel. This place is a little noisy to-day, but we'll start on the first stage of your journey when you're ready."

He gave Miss Schuyler his arm, and moved towards the thickest of the crowd, which, though apparently slightly hostile, made way for him. Here and there a man drove his fellows back, and one, catching up a loose plank, laid it down for the party to cross the rail switches on. Torrance turned to thank him, but the man swept his hat off with a laugh.

"I wouldn't worry; it wasn't for you," he said. "It's a long while since we've seen anything so pretty as Miss Torrance and the

other one."

Flora Schuyler flushed a little, but Hetty turned to the speaker with a sparkle in her eyes.

"Now," she said, "that was 'most worth a dollar, and if I didn't know what kind of man you were, I'd give it you. But what about Clarkson's Lou?"

There was a laugh from the assembly, and the man appeared embarrassed.

"Well," he said slowly, "she went off with Jo."

Miss Torrance nodded sympathetically. "Still, if she knew no better than that, I wouldn't worry. Jo had a cast in his eye."

The crowd laughed again, and Flora Schuyler glanced at her companion with some astonishment as she asked, "Do you always talk to them that way?"

"Of course," said Hetty. "They're our boys – grown right here. Aren't they splendid?"

Miss Schuyler once more appeared dubious, and made no answer; but she noticed that the man now preceded them, and raised his hand when they came up with the band, which had apparently halted to indulge in retort or badinage with some of those who followed them.

"Hold on a few minutes, boys, and down with that flag," he said.

Then a tawdry banner was lowered suddenly between two poles, but not before Miss Torrance had seen part of the blazoned legend. Its unvarnished forcefulness brought a flush to her

companion's cheek.

"Dad," she asked more gravely, "what is it all about?"

Torrance laughed a little. "That," he said, "is a tolerably big question. It would take quite a long while to answer it."

They had a street to traverse, and Hetty saw that it was filled with little knots of men, some of whom stared at her father, though as she passed their hats came off. Miss Schuyler, on her part, noticed that most of the stores were shut, and felt that she had left New York a long way behind as she glanced at the bare wooden houses cracked by frost and sun, rickety plank walks, whirling wisps of dust, and groups of men, splendid in their lean, muscular symmetry and picturesque apparel. There was a boldness in their carriage, and a grace that approached the statuesque in every poise. Still, she started when they passed one wooden building where blue-shirted figures with rifles stood motionless in the verandah.

"The jail," said Torrance, quietly. "The Sheriff has one or two rioters safe inside there."

They found an indifferent meal ready at the wooden hotel, and when they descended in riding dress a wagon with their baggage was waiting outside the door, while a few mounted men with wide hats and bandoliers came up with three saddle-horses. Torrance bestowed the maid in the light wagon, and, when the two girls were mounted, swung himself into the saddle. Then, as they trotted down the unpaved street, Hetty glanced at him and pointed to the dusty horsemen.

"What are the boys for?" she asked.

Torrance smiled grimly. "I told you we had our troubles. It seemed better to bring them, in case we had any difficulty with Larry's friends."

"Larry's friends?" asked Hetty, almost indignantly.

Torrance nodded. "Yes," he said. "You have seen a few of them. They were carrying the flag with the inscription at the depot."

Hetty asked nothing further, but Flora Schuyler noticed the little flash in her eyes, and as they crossed the railroad track the clear notes of the bugles rose again and were followed by a tramp of feet. Glancing over their shoulders the girls could see men moving in a body, with the flag they carried tossing amidst the dust. They were coming on in open fours, and when the bugles ceased deep voices sent a marching song ringing across the wooden town.

Hetty's eyes sparkled; the stockriders seemed to swing more lightly in their saddles, and Flora Schuyler felt a little quiver run through her. Something that jingling rhythm and the simple words expressed but inarticulately stirred her blood, as she remembered that in her nation's last great struggle the long battalions had limped on, ragged and footsore, singing that song.

"Listen," said Hetty, while the colour crept into her face. "Oh, I know it's scarcely music, and the crudest verse; but it served its purpose, and is there any nation on earth could put more swing and spirit into the grandest theme?"

Torrance smiled somewhat drily, but there was a curious expression in his face. “Some of those men are drawing their pension, but they’re not with us,” he said. “It’s only because we have sent in all the boys we can spare that the Sheriff, who has their partners in his jail, can hold the town.”

A somewhat impressive silence followed this, and Flora Schuyler glanced at Hetty when they rode out into the white prairie with two dusty men with bandoliers on either flank.

VI
THE INCENDIARY

Events of no apparent moment have extensive issues now and then, and while cattle-man and homesteader braced themselves for the conflict which they felt would come, the truce might have lasted longer but for the fact that one night Muller slept indifferently in the new house he had built. He was never quite sure what made him restless, or prompted him to open and lean out of his window; and, when he had done this, he saw and heard nothing unusual for a while.

On one hand the birch bluff rose, a dusky wall, against the indigo of the sky, and in front of him the prairie rolled away, silent and shadowy. There was scarcely a sound but the low ripple of the creek, until, somewhere far off in the distance, a coyote howled. The drawn-out wail had in it something unearthly, and Muller, who was by no means an imaginative man, shivered a little. The deep silence of the great empty land emphasized by the sound reacted upon him and increased his restlessness.

Scarcely knowing why he did so, except that he felt he could not sleep, he slipped on a few garments, and moved softly to the door, that he might not disturb his daughter. There was no moon when he went out, but the stars shone clearly in the great vault of blue, and the barns and stables he had built rose black against the

sky. Though Grant had lent him assistance and he had hewn the lumber on the spot, one cannot build a homestead and equip it for nothing, and when he had provided himself with working horses, Muller had sunk the last of his scanty capital in the venture. It was perhaps this fact which induced him to approach the stable, moving noiselessly in his slippers, and glance within.

The interior was black and shadowy, but there was no doubting the fact that the beasts were moving restlessly. Muller went in, holding his breath as he peered about him, and one broncho backed away as he approached its stall. Muller patted it on the flank, and the horse stood still, as though reassured, when it recognized him, which was not without its meaning. He listened, but hearing nothing groped round the stable, and taking a hayfork went out as softly as he had entered, and took up his post in the deepest shadow, where he commanded outbuildings and house. There was, he knew, nobody but Grant dwelling within several leagues of him, and as yet property was at least as safe in that country as it was in Chicago or New York; but as he leaned, impassively watchful, against the wall, he remembered an episode which had happened a few weeks earlier.

He had been overtaken by a band of stockriders when fording the creek with his daughter, and one who loitered behind them reined his horse in and spoke to the girl. Muller never knew what his words had been; but he saw the sudden colour in the fräulein's face, and seized the man's bridle. An altercation ensued, and when the man rejoined his comrades, who apparently did not

sympathize with him, his bridle hand hung limp and the farmer was smiling as he swung a stick. Muller attached no especial importance to the affair; but Grant, who did not tell him so, differed in this when he heard of it. He knew that the cattle-rider is usually rather chivalrous than addicted to distasteful gallantries.

In any case, Muller heard nothing for a while, and felt tempted to return to his bed when he grew chilly. He had, however, spent bitter nights stalking the *franc tireurs* in the snow, and the vigilance taught and demanded by an inflexible discipline had not quite deserted him, though he was considerably older and less nimble now. At last, however, a dim, moving shadow appeared round a corner of the building, stopped a moment, and then slid on again towards the door. So noiseless was it that Muller could almost have believed his eyes had deceived him until he heard the hasp rattle. Still, he waited until the figure passed into the stable, and then very cautiously crept along the wall. Muller was not so vigorous as he had been when proficiency in the use of the bayonet had been drilled into him; but while his fingers tightened on the haft of the fork he fancied that he had still strength enough to serve his purpose. He had also been taught to use it to the best advantage.

He straightened himself a little when he stood in the entrance and looked about him. There was a gleam of light in the stable now, for a lantern stood upon a manger and revealed by its uncertain glimmer a pile of prairie hay, with a kerosene-can upon

it, laid against the logs. Muller was not wholly astonished, but he was looking for more than that, and the next moment he saw a shadowy object apparently loosing the nearest horse's halter. It was doubtless a merciful deed, but it was to cost the incendiary dear; for when, perhaps warned by some faint sound, he looked up suddenly, he saw a black figure between him and the door.

On the instant he dropped the halter, and the hand that had held it towards his belt; but, as it happened, the horse pinned him against the stall, and his opportunity had passed when it moved again. Muller had drawn his right leg back with his knee bent a trifle, and there was a rattle as he brought the long fork down to the charge. Thus, when the man was free the deadly points twinkled in a ray from the lantern within a foot of his breast. It was also unpleasantly evident that a heave of the farmer's shoulder would bury them in the quivering flesh.

"Hands oop!" a stern voice said.

The man delayed a second. The butt of the pistol that would equalize the affair was almost within his grasp, and Muller stood in the light, but he saw an ominous glint in the pale blue eyes and the farmer's fingers tighten on the haft. There was also a suggestive raising of one shoulder; and his hands went up above his head. Muller advanced the points an inch or two, stiffening his right leg, and smiled grimly. The other man stared straight in front of him with dilated eyes, and a little grey patch growing larger in either cheek.

"Are you going to murder me, you condemned Dutchman?"

he said.

"Yes," said Muller tranquilly, "if you der movement make. So! It is done without der trouble when you have der bayonet exercise make."

The points gleamed as they swung forward, and the man gasped; but they stopped at the right second, and Muller, who had hove his burly form a trifle more upright, sank back again, bringing his foot down with a stamp. The little demonstration was more convincing than an hour of argument.

"Well," said the man hoarsely, "I'm corralled. Throw that thing away, and I'll give you my pistol."

Muller laughed, and then raised his great voice in what was to the other an unknown tongue. "Lotta," he said, "Come quick, and bring the American rifle."

There was silence for perhaps five minutes, and the men watched each other, one white in the face and quivering a little, his adversary impassive as a statue, but quietly observant. Then there was a patter of hasty footsteps, and the fräulein stood in the lantern light with a flushed, plump face and somewhat scanty dress. She apparently recognized the man, and her colour deepened, but that was the only sign of confusion she showed; and it was evident that the discipline of the fatherland had not been neglected in Muller's household.

"Lotta," he said in English, "open der little slide. You feel der cartridge? Now, der butt to der shoulder, und der eye on der sight, as I have teach you. Der middle of him is der best place. I shout,

und you press quite steady."

He spoke with a quiet precision that had its effect; and, whatever the girl felt, she obeyed each command in rotation. There was, however, one danger which the stranger realized, and that was that with an involuntary contraction of the forefinger she might anticipate the last one.

"She'll shoot me before she means to," he said, with a little gasp. "Come and take the condemned pistol."

"Der middle of him!" said Muller tranquilly. "No movement make, you!"

Dropping the fork he moved forward, not in front of the man, but to his side, and whipped the pistol from his belt.

"One turn make," he said. "So! Your hand behind you. Lotta, you will now a halter get."

The girl's loose bodice rose and fell as she laid down the rifle, but she was swift, and in less than another minute Muller had bound his captive's hands securely behind his back and cross-lashed them from wrist to elbow. He inspected the work critically and then nodded, as if contented.

"Lotta," he said, "put der saddle on der broncho horse. Then in der house you der cordial find, und of it one large spoonful mit der water take. My pipe you bring me also, und then you ride for Mr. Grant."

The girl obeyed him; and when the drumming of horse-hoofs died away Muller sat down in front of his prisoner, who now lay upon a pile of prairie hay, and with his usual slow precision

lighted his big meerschaum. The American watched him for a minute or two, and then grew red in the face as a fit of passion shook him.

"You condemned Dutchman!" he said.

Muller laughed. "Der combliment," he said, "is nod of much use to-night."

It was an hour later when Grant and several horsemen arrived, and he nodded as he glanced at the prisoner.

"I figured it was you. There's not another man on the prairie mean enough for this kind of work," he said, pointing to the kerosene-can. "You didn't even know enough to do it decently, and you're about the only American who'd have let an old man tie his hands."

The prisoner winced perceptibly. "Well," he said hoarsely, glancing towards the hayfork, rifle, and pistol, which still lay at Muller's feet, "if you're astonished, look at the blamed Dutchman's armoury."

"I've one thing to ask you," Grant said sternly. "It's going to pay you to be quite straight with me. Who hired you?"

There was defiance in the incendiary's eyes, but Grant was right in his surmise that he was resolute only because that of the two fears which oppressed him he preferred to bear the least.

"You can ask till you get sick of it, but you'll get nothing out of me," he said.

"Take him out," said Grant. "Put him on to the led horse. If you'll come round to my place for breakfast, I'll be glad to see

you, Muller."

"I come," said Muller. "Mit der *franc tireur* it is finish quicker, but here in der Republic we reverence have for der law."

Grant laughed a little. "Well," he said drily, "I'm not quite sure."

He swung himself to the saddle, swept off his hat to the girl, who stood with the lantern light upon her in the doorway, smiling but flushed, and shook his bridle. Then there was a jingle that was lost in the thud of hoofs, and the men vanished into the shadowy prairie. Half an hour later the homestead was once more dark and silent; but three men sent out by Grant were riding at a reckless gallop across the great dusky levels, and breakfast was not finished when those whom they had summoned reached Fremont ranch.

They were young men for the most part, and Americans, though there were a few who had only just become so among them, and two or three whose grim faces and grey hair told of a long struggle with adversity. They were clad in blue shirts and jean, and the hard brown hands of most betokened a close acquaintance with plough stilt, axe, and bridle, though here and there one had from his appearance evidently lived delicately. All appeared quietly resolute, for they knew that the law which had given them the right to build their homes upon that prairie as yet left them to bear the risks attached to the doing of it. Hitherto, the fact that the great ranchers had made their own laws and enforced them had been ignored or tacitly accepted by the State.

When they were seated, one of the men deputed to question the prisoner, stood up. “You can take it that there’s nothing to be got out of him,” he said.

“Still,” said another, “we know he is one of Clavering’s boys.”

There was a little murmur, for of all the cattle-barons Clavering was the only man who had as yet earned his adversaries’ individual dislike. They were prepared to pull down the others because their interests, which they had little difficulty in fancying coincided with those of their country, demanded it; but Clavering, with his graceful insolence, ironical contempt of them, and thinly-veiled pride, was a type of all their democracy anathematized. More than one of them had winced under his soft laugh and lightly spoken jibes, which rankled more than a downright injury.

“The question is what we’re going to do with him,” said a third speaker.

Again the low voices murmured, until a man stood up. “There’s one cure for his complaint, and that’s a sure one, but I’m not going to urge it now,” he said. “Boys, we don’t want to be the first to take up the rifle, and it would make our intentions quite as plain if we dressed him in a coat of tar and rode him round the town. Nobody would have any use for him after that, and it would be a bigger slap in Clavering’s face than anything else we could do to him.”

Some of the men appeared relieved, for it was evident they had no great liking for the sterner alternative; and there was

acclamation until Grant rose quietly at the head of the table.

"I've got to move a negative," he said. "It would be better if you handed him to the Sheriff."

There was astonishment in most of the faces, and somebody said, "The Sheriff! He'd let him go right off. The cattle-men have got the screw on him."

"Well," said Larry quietly, "he has done his duty so far, and may do it again. I figure we ought to give him the chance."

Exclamations of dissent followed, and a man with a grim, lean face stood up. He spoke tolerable English, but his accent differed from that of the rest.

"The first man put it straight when he told you there was only one cure – the one they found out in France a hundred years ago," he said. "You don't quite realize it yet. You haven't lived as we did back there across the sea, and seen your women thrust off the pavement into the gutter to make room for an officer, or been struck with the sword-hilt if you resented an insult before your fellow citizens. Will you take off your hats to the rich men who are trampling on you, you republicans, and, while they leave you the right of speech, beg them to respect your rights and liberties? Do that, and sit still a little, and they'll fasten the yoke we've groaned under on your necks."

"I don't know that it isn't eloquent, but it isn't business," said somebody.

The man laughed sardonically. "That's where you're wrong," he said. "I'm trying to show you that if you want your liberties

you've got to fight for them, and your leader doesn't seem to know when, by hanging one man, he can save a hundred from misery. It's not the man who laid the kindling you're striking at, but, through him, those who employed him. Let them see you'll take your rights without leave of them. They've sent you warning that if you stay here they'll burn your homesteads down, and they're waiting your answer. Hang their firebug where everyone can see him, in the middle of the town."

It was evident that the men were wavering. They had come there with the law behind them, but, from their youth up, some following visions that could never be realized, had hated the bureaucrat, and the rest, crippled by the want of dollars, had fought with frost and drought and hail. It was also plain that they felt the capture of the incendiary had given them an opportunity. Then, when a word would have turned the scale, Grant stood up at the head of the table, very resolute in face.

"I still move a negative and an amendment, boys," he said. "First, though that's not the most important, because I've a natural shrinking from butchering an unarmed man. Secondly, it was not the cattle-men who sent him, but one of them, and just because he meant to draw you on it would be the blamedest bad policy to humour him. Would Torrance, or Allonby, or the others, have done this thing? They're hard men, but they believe they're right, as we do, and they're Americans. Now for the third reason: when Clavering meant to burn Muller's homestead, he struck at me, guessing that some of you would stand behind me.

He knew your temper, and he'd have laughed at us as hot-blooded rabble – you know how he can do it – when he'd put us in the wrong. Well, this time we'll give the law a show."

There was discussion, but Larry sat still, saying nothing further, with a curious gravity in his face, until a man stood up again.

"We think you're right," he said. "Still, there's a question. What are you going to do if they try again?"

"Strike," said Larry quietly. "I'll go with you to the hanging of the next one."

Nothing more was said, and the men rode away with relief in their faces, though three of them, girt with rifle and bandolier, trotted behind the wagon in which the prisoner sat.

VII
LARRY PROVES INTRACTABLE

It was some little time after her arrival at Cedar Range when Miss Torrance, who took Flora Schuyler with her, rode out across the prairie. There were a good many things she desired to investigate personally, and, though a somewhat independent young woman, she was glad that the opportunity of informing Torrance of her intention was not afforded her, since he had ridden off somewhere earlier in the day. It also happened that although the days were growing colder she arrayed herself fastidiously in a long, light skirt, which she had not worn since she left Cedar, and which with the white hat that matched it became her better than the conventional riding attire. Miss Schuyler naturally noticed this.

"Is it a garden party we are going to?" she asked.

Hetty laughed. "We may meet some of our neighbours, and after staying with you all that while in New York I don't want to go back on you. I had the thing specially made in Chicago for riding in."

Miss Schuyler was not quite satisfied, but she made no further comment, and there was much to occupy her attention. The bleached plain was bright with sunshine and rolled back into the distance under an arch of cloudless blue, while the crisp, clear

air stirred her blood like an elixir. They swept up a rise and down it, the colour mantling in their faces, over the long hollow, and up a slope again, until, as the white grass rolled behind her, Flora Schuyler yielded to the exhilaration of swift motion, and, flinging off the constraint of the city, rejoiced in the springy rush of the mettlesome beast beneath her. Streaming white levels, the blue of the sliding sky, the kiss of the wind on her hot cheek, and the roar of hoofs, all reacted upon her until she laughed aloud when she hurled her half-wild broncho down a slope.

"This is surely the finest country in the world," she said.

The words were blown behind her, but Hetty caught some of them, and, when at last she drew bridle where a rise ran steep and seamed with badger-holes against the sky, nodded with a little air of pride.

"Oh, yes, and it's ours. All of it," she said. "Worth fighting for, isn't it?"

Flora Schuyler laughed a little, but she shook her head. "It's a pity one couldn't leave that out. You would stay here with your men folk if there was trouble?"

Hetty looked at her with a little flash in her eyes. "Why, of course! It's our country. We made it, and I'd go around in rags and groom the boys' horses if it would help them to whip out the men who want to take it from us."

Flora Schuyler smiled a trifle drily. "The trouble is that when we fall out, one is apt to find as good Americans as we are, and sometimes the men we like the most, standing in with the

opposition. It has happened quite often since the war."

Hetty shook her bridle impatiently. "Then, of course, one would not like them any longer," she said.

Nothing more was said until they crossed the ridge above them, when Hetty pulled her horse up. Across the wide levels before her advanced a line of dusty teams, the sunlight twinkling on the great breaker ploughs they hauled, while the black loam rolled in softly gleaming waves behind them. They came on with slow precision, and in the forefront rolled a great machine that seamed and rent the prairie into triple furrows.

"What are they doing there? Do they belong to you?" asked Miss Schuyler.

The flush the wind had brought there turned to a deeper crimson in Hetty's usually colourless face. "To us!" she said, and her voice had a thrill of scorn. "They're homesteaders. Ride down. I want to see who's leading them."

She led the way with one little gloved hand clenched on the dainty switch she held; but before she reached the foremost team the man who pulled it up sprang down from the driving-seat of the big machine. A tall wire fence, with a notice attached to it, barred his way. The other ploughs stopped behind him, somebody brought an axe, and Hetty set her lips when the glistening blade whirled high and fell. Thrice it flashed in the sunlight, swung by sinewy arms, and then, as the fence went down, a low, half-articulate cry rose from the waiting men. It was not exultant, but there was in it the suggestion of a steadfast

purpose.

Hetty sat still and looked at them, a little sparkle in her dark eyes, and a crimson spot in either cheek, while the laces that hung from her neck across the bodice of the white dress rose and fell. It occurred to Flora Schuyler that she had never seen her companion look half so well, and she waited with strained expectancy for what should follow, realizing, with the dramatic instinct most women have, who the man with the axe must be. He turned slowly, straightening his back and stood for a moment erect and statuesque, with the blue shirt open at his bronzed neck and the great axe gleaming in his hand; and Hetty gasped. Miss Schuyler's surmise was verified, for it was Larry Grant.

"Larry," said her companion, and her voice had a curious ring, "what are you doing here?"

The man, who appeared to ignore the question, swung off his wide hat. "Aren't you and Miss Schuyler rather far from home?" he asked.

Flora Schuyler understood him when, glancing round, she noticed the figure of a mounted man forced up against the skyline here and there. Hetty, however, had evidently not seen them.

"I want an answer, please," she said.

"Well," said Larry gravely, "I was cutting down that fence."

"Why were you cutting it down?" persisted Miss Torrance.

"It was in the way."

"Of what?"

Grant turned and pointed to the men, sturdy toilers starved

out of bleak Dakota and axe-men farmers from the forests of Michigan. “Of these, and the rest who are coming by and by,” he said. “Still, I don’t want to go into that; and you seem angry. You haven’t offered to shake hands with me, Hetty.”

Miss Torrance sat very still, one hand on the switch, and another on the bridle, looking at him with a little scornful smile on her lips. Then she glanced at the prairie beyond the severed fence.

“That land belongs to my friends,” she said.

Grant’s face grew a trifle wistful, but his voice was grave. “They have had the use of it, but it belongs to the United States, and other people have the right to farm there now. Still, that needn’t make any trouble between you and me.”

“No?” said the girl, with a curious hardness in her inflection; but her face softened suddenly. “Larry, while you only talked we didn’t mind; but no one fancied you would have done this. Yes, I’m angry with you. I have been home ’most a month, and you never rode over to see me; while now you want to talk politics.”

Grant smiled a trifle wearily. “I would sooner talk about anything else; and if you ask him, your father will tell you why I have not been to the range. I don’t want to make you angry, Hetty.”

“Then you will give up this foolishness and make friends with us again,” said the girl, very graciously. “It can’t come to anything, Larry, and you are one of us. You couldn’t want to take away our land and give it to this rabble?”

Hetty was wholly bewitching, as even Flora Schuyler, who fancied she understood the grimness in the man's face, felt just then. He, however, looked away across the prairie, and the movement had its significance to one of the company, who, having less at stake, was the more observant. When he turned again, however, he seemed to stand very straight.

"I'm afraid I can't," he said.

"No?" said Hetty, still graciously. "Not even when I ask you?"

Grant shook his head. "They have my word, and you wouldn't like me to go back upon what I feel is right," he said.

Hetty laughed. "If you will think a little, you can't help seeing that you are very wrong."

Again the little weary smile crept into Grant's face. "One naturally thinks a good deal before starting in with this kind of thing, and I have to go through. I can't stop now, even to please you. But can't we still be friends?"

For a moment there was astonishment in the girl's face, then it flushed, and as her lips hardened and every line in her slight figure seemed to grow rigid, she reminded Miss Schuyler of the autocrat of Cedar Range.

"You ask me that?" she said. "You, an American, turning Dutchmen and these bush-choppers loose upon the people you belong to. Can't you see what the answer must be?"

Grant did apparently, for he mutely bent his head; but there was a shout just then, and when one of the vedettes on the skyline suddenly moved forward he seized Miss Torrance's bridle and

wheeled her horse.

"Ride back to the Range," he said sharply, "as straight as you can. Tell your father that you met me. Let your horse go, Miss Schuyler."

As he spoke he brought his hand down upon the beast's flank and it went forward with a bound. The one Flora Schuyler rode flung up its head, and in another moment they were sweeping at a gallop across the prairie. A mile had been left behind before Hetty could pull her half-broken horse up; but the struggle that taxed every sinew had been beneficial, and she laughed a trifle breathlessly.

"I'm afraid I lost my temper; and I'm angry yet," she said. "It's the first time Larry wouldn't do what I asked him, and it was mean of him to send us off like that, just when one wanted to put on all one's dignity."

Miss Schuyler appeared thoughtful. "I fancy he did it because it was necessary. Didn't it strike you that you were hurting him? That is a good man and an honest one, though, of course, he may be mistaken."

"He must be," said Hetty. "Now I used to think ever so much of Larry, and that is why I got angry with him. It isn't nice to feel one has been fooled. How can he be good when he wants to take our land from us?"

Flora Schuyler laughed. "You are quite delightful, Hetty, now and then. You have read a little, and been taught history. Can't you remember any?"

"Oh yes," said Hetty, with a little thoughtful nod. "Still, the men who made the trouble in those old days were usually buried before anyone was quite sure whether they were right or not. Try to put yourself in my place. What would you do?"

There was a somewhat curious look in Miss Schuyler's blue eyes. "I think if I had known a man like that one as long as you have done, I should believe in him – whatever he did."

"Well," said Hetty gravely, "if you had, just as long as you could remember, seen your father and his friends taking no pleasure, but working every day, and putting most of every dollar they made back into the ranch, you would find it quite difficult to believe that the man who meant to take it from them now they were getting old and wanted to rest and enjoy what they had worked for was doing good."

Flora Schuyler nodded. "Yes," she said, "I would. It's quite an old trouble. There are two ways of looking at everything, and other folks have had to worry over them right back to the beginning."

Then she suddenly tightened her grasp on the bridle, for the ringing of a rifle rose, sharp and portentous, from beyond the rise. The colour faded in her cheek, and Hetty leaned forward a trifle in her saddle, with lips slightly parted, as though in strained expectancy. No sound now reached them from beyond the low, white ridge that hemmed in their vision but a faint drumming of hoofs. Then Flora Schuyler answered the question in her companion's eyes.

"I think it was only a warning," she said.

She wheeled her horse and they rode on slowly, hearing nothing further, until the Range rose from behind the big birch bluff. Torrance had returned when they reached it, and Hetty found him in his office room.

"I met Larry on the prairie, and of course I talked to him," she said. "I asked him why he had not been to the Range, and he seemed to think it would be better if he did not come."

Torrance smiled drily. "Then I guess he showed quite commendable taste as well as good sense. You are still decided not to go back to New York, Hetty?"

"Yes," said the girl, with a little resolute nod. "You see, I can't help being young and just a little good-looking, but I'm Miss Torrance of Cedar all the time."

Torrance's face was usually grim, but it grew a trifle softer then. "Hetty," he said, "they taught you a good many things I never heard of at that Boston school, but I'm not sure you know that all trade and industry is built upon just this fact: what a man has made and worked hard for is his own. Would anyone put up houses or raise cattle if he thought his neighbours could take them from him? Now there's going to be trouble over that question here, and, though it isn't likely, your father may be beaten down. He may have to do things that wouldn't seem quite nice to a dainty young woman, and folks may denounce him; but it's quite plain that if you stay here you will have to stand in with somebody."

The girl, who was touched by the unusual tenderness in his eyes, sat down upon the table, and slipped an arm about his neck.

"Who would I stand in with but you?" she said. "We'll whip the rustlers out of the country, and, whether it sounds nice at the time or not, you couldn't do anything but the square thing."

Torrance kissed her gravely, but he sighed and his face grew stern again when she slipped out of the room.

"There will not be many who will come through this trouble with hands quite clean," he said.

It was during the afternoon, and Torrance had driven off again, when, as the two girls were sitting in the little room which was set apart for them, a horseman rode up to the Range, and Flora Schuyler, who was nearest the window, drew back the curtain.

"That man should sit on horseback always," she said; "he's quite a picture."

Hetty nodded. "Yes," she said. "Still, you told me you didn't like him. It's Clavering. Now, I wonder what he put those things on for – he doesn't wear them very often – and whether he knew my father wasn't here."

Clavering would probably have attracted the attention of most young women just then, for he had dressed himself in the fashion the prairie stockriders were addicted to, as he did occasionally, perhaps because he knew it suited him. He had artistic perceptions, and could adapt himself harmoniously to his surroundings, and he knew Hetty's appreciation of the

picturesque. His sallow face showed clean cut almost to feminine refinement under the wide hat, and the blue shirt which clung about him displayed his slender symmetry. It was, however, not made of flannel, but apparently of silk, and the embroidered deerskin jacket which showed the squareness of his shoulders, was not only daintily wrought, but had evidently cost a good many dollars. His loose trousers and silver spurs were made in Mexican fashion: but the boldness of the dark eyes, and the pride that revealed itself in the very pose of the man, redeemed him from any taint of vanity.

He sat still until a hired man came up, then swung himself from the saddle, and in another few moments had entered the room with his wide hat in his hand.

"You find us alone," said Hetty. "Are you astonished?"

"I am content," said Clavering. "Why do you ask me?"

"Well," said Hetty naïvely, "I fancied you must have seen my father on the prairie, and could have stopped him if you had wanted to."

There was a little flash in Clavering's dark eyes that was very eloquent. "The fact is, I did. Still, I was afraid he would want to take me along with him."

Hetty laughed. "I am growing up," she said. "Three years ago you wouldn't have wasted those speeches on me. Well, you can sit down and talk to Flora."

Clavering did as he was bidden. "It's a time-honoured question," he said. "How do you like this country?"

"There's something in its bigness that gets hold of one," said Miss Schuyler. "One feels free out here on these wide levels in the wind and sun."

Clavering nodded, and Flora Schuyler fancied from his alertness that he had been waiting for an opportunity. "It would be wise to enjoy it while you can," he said. "In another year or two the freedom may be gone, and the prairie shut off in little squares by wire fences. Then one will be permitted to ride along a trail between rows of squalid homesteads flanked by piles of old boots and provision-cans. We will have exchanged the stockrider for the slouching farmer with a swarm of unkempt children and a slatternly, scolding wife then."

"You believe that will come about?" asked Miss Schuyler, giving him the lead she felt he was waiting for.

Clavering looked thoughtful. "It would never come if we stood loyally together, but – and it is painful to admit it – one or two of our people seem quite willing to destroy their friends to gain cheap popularity by truckling to the rabble. Of course, we could spare those men quite well, but they know our weak points, and can do a good deal of harm by betraying them."

"Now," said Hetty, with a sparkle in her eyes, "you know quite well that if some of them are mistaken they will do nothing mean. Can't they have their notions and be straight men?"

"It is quite difficult to believe it," said Clavering. "I will tell you what one or two of them did. There was trouble down at Gordon's place fifty miles west, and his cow-boys whipped off

a band of Dutchmen who wanted to pull his fences down. Well, they came back a night or two later with a mob of Americans, and laid hands on the homestead. We are proud of the respect we pay women in this country, Miss Schuyler, but that night Mrs. Gordon's and her daughters' rooms were broken into, and the girls turned out on the prairie. It was raining, and I believe they were not even allowed to provide themselves with suitable clothing. Of course, nothing of that kind could happen here, or I would not have told you."

Hetty's voice was curiously quiet as she asked, "Was nothing done to provoke them?"

"Yes," said Clavering, with a dry smile, "Gordon shot one of them; but is it astonishing? What would you expect of an American if a horde of rabble who held nothing sacred poured into his house at night? Oh, yes, he shot one of them, and would have given them the magazine, only that somebody felled him with an axe. The Dutchman was only grazed, but Gordon is lying senseless still."

There was an impressive silence, and the man sat still with the veins on his forehead a trifle swollen and a glow in his eyes. His story was also accurate, so far as it went; but he had, with a purpose, not told the whole of it.

"You are sure there were Americans among them?" asked Hetty, very quietly.

"They were led by Americans. You know one or two of them."

"No," said Hetty, almost fiercely. "I don't know. But Larry

wasn't there?"

Clavering shook his head, but there was a curious incisiveness in his tone. "Still, we found out that his committee was consulted and countenanced the affair."

"Then Larry wasn't at the meeting," said Miss Torrance. "He couldn't have been."

Clavering made her a little and very graceful inclination. "One would respect such faith as yours."

Miss Schuyler, who was a young woman of some penetration, deftly changed the topic, and Clavering came near to pleasing her, but he did not quite succeed, before he took his departure. Then Hetty glanced inquiringly at her companion.

Flora Schuyler nodded. "I know just what you mean, and I was mistaken."

"Yes?" said Hetty. "Then you like him?"

Miss Schuyler shook her head. "No. I fancied he was clever, and he didn't come up to my expectations. You see, he was too obvious."

"About Larry?"

"Yes. Are you not just a little inconsistent, Hetty?"

Miss Torrance laughed. "I don't know," she said. "I am, of course, quite angry with Larry, but nobody else has a right to abuse him."

Flora Schuyler said nothing further, and while she sat in thoughtful silence Clavering walked down the hall with Hetty's maid. He was a well-favoured man, and the girl was vain. She

blushed when he looked down on her with a trace of admiration in his smile.

"You like the prairie?" he said.

She admitted that she was pleased with what she had seen of it, and Clavering's assumed admiration became bolder.

"Well, it's a good country, and different from the East," he said. "There are a good many more dollars to be picked up here, and pretty women are quite scarce. They usually get married right off to a rancher. Now I guess you came out to better yourself. It takes quite a long time to get rich down East."

The girl blushed again, and when she informed him that she had a crippled sister who was a charge on the family, Clavering smiled as he drew on a leather glove.

"You'll find you have struck the right place," he said. "Now I wonder if you could fix a pin or something in this button shank. It's coming off, you see."

The girl did it, and when he went out found a bill lying on the table where he had been standing. The value of it somewhat astonished her, but after a little deliberation she put it in her pocket.

"If he doesn't ask for it when he comes back I'll know he meant me to keep it," she said.

VIII
THE SHERIFF

Miss Schuyler had conjectured correctly respecting the rifle-shot which announced the arrival of a messenger; a few minutes after the puff of white smoke on the crest of the rise had drifted away, a mounted man rode up to Grant at a gallop. His horse was white with dust and spume, but his spurs were red.

"Railroad district executive sent me on to let you know the Sheriff had lost your man," he said.

"Lost him," said Grant.

"Well," said the horseman, "put it as it pleases you, but, as he had him in the jail, it seems quite likely he let him go."

There was a growl from the teamsters who had clustered round, and Grant's face grew stern. "He was able to hold the two homesteaders Clavering's boys brought him."

"Oh, yes," said the other, "he has them tight enough. You'll remember one of the cattle-boys and a storekeeper got hurt during the trouble, and our men are not going to have much show at the trial Torrance and the Sheriff are fixing up!"

"Then," said Grant wearily, "we'll stop that trial. You will get a fresh horse in my stable and tell your executive I'm going to take our men out of jail, and if it suits them to stand in they can meet us at the trail forks, Thursday, ten at night."

The man nodded. “I’m tolerably played out, but I’ll start back right now,” he said.

He rode off towards the homestead, and Grant turned to the rest. “Jake, you’ll take the eastern round; Charley, you’ll ride west. Give them the handful of oats at every shanty to show it’s urgent. They’re to be at Fremont in riding order at nine to-morrow night.”

In another ten minutes the men were riding hard across the prairie, and Grant, with a sigh, went on with his ploughing. It would be next year before he could sow, and whether he would ever reap the crop was more than any man in that region would have ventured to predict. He worked however, until the stars were out that night and commenced again when the red sun crept up above the prairie rim the next day; but soon after dusk mounted men rode up one by one to Fremont ranch. They rode good horses, and each carried a Winchester rifle slung behind him when they assembled, silent and grim, in the big living-room.

“Boys,” said Grant quietly, “we have borne a good deal, and tried to keep the law, but it is plain that the cattle-men, who bought it up, have left none for us. Now, the Sheriff, who has the two homesteaders safe, has let the man we sent him go.”

There was an ominous murmur and Grant went on. “The homesteaders, who only wanted to buy food and raised no trouble until they were fired on, will be tried by the cattle-men, and I needn’t tell you what kind of chance they’ll get. We pledged ourselves to see they had fair play when they came in, and there’s

only one means of getting it. We are going to take them from the Sheriff, but there will be no fighting. We'll ride in strong enough to leave no use for that. Now, before we start, are you all willing to ride with me?"

Again a hoarse murmur answered him, and Grant, glancing down the row of set faces under the big lamps, was satisfied.

"Then we'll have supper," he said quietly. "It may be a long while before any of us gets a meal again."

It was a silent repast. As yet the homesteaders, at least in that district, had met contumely with patience and resisted passively each attempt to dislodge them, though it had cost their leader a strenuous effort to restrain the more ardent from the excesses some of their comrades farther east had already committed; but at last the most peaceful of them felt that the time to strike in turn had come. They mounted when supper was over and rode in silence past willow bluff and dusky rise across the desolate waste. The badger heard the jingle of their bridles, and now and then a lonely coyote, startled by the soft drumming of the hoofs, rose with bristling fur and howled; but no cow-boy heard their passage, or saw them wind in and out through devious hollows when daylight came. Still, here and there an anxious woman stood, with hazy eyes, in the door of a lonely shanty, wondering whether the man she had sent out to strike for the home he had built her would ever ride back again. For they, too, had their part in the struggle, and it was perhaps the hardest one.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.