Bindloss Harold

Hawtrey's Deputy

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Bindloss H.

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Содержание

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CHAPTER I.
SALLY CREIGHTON

The frost outside was bitter, and the prairie, which rolled back from Lander's in long undulations to the far horizon, gleamed white beneath the moon, but there was warmth and brightness in Stukely's wooden barn. It stood at one end of the little, desolate settlement, where the trail that came up from the railroad thirty miles away forked off into two wavy ribands that melted into a waste of snow. Lander's consisted then of five or six frame houses and stores, a hotel of the same material, several sod stables, and a few birch-log barns; and its inhabitants considered it one of the most promising places in Western Canada. That, however, is the land of promise, a promise that is in due time usually fulfilled, and the men of Lander's were, for the most part, shrewdly practical optimists. They made the most of a somewhat grim and frugal present, and staked all they had to give – the few dollars they had brought in with them, and their powers of enduring toil – upon the roseate future.

Stukely had given them, and their scattered neighbours, who had driven there across several leagues of prairie, a supper in his barn, and a big rusty stove, which had been brought in for the occasion, stood in the midst of it. Its pipe glowed in places a dull red, and Stukely now and then wondered uneasily whether it was charring a larger hole through the shingles of the roof. On one side of the stove the floor had been cleared; on the other benches, empty barrels, and tables were huddled together, and such of the guests as were not at the moment dancing sat upon them indiscriminately. A keg of hard Ontario cider had been provided for their refreshment, and it was open to anybody to ladle up what he wanted with a tin dipper, while a haze of tobacco smoke drifted in thin blue wisps beneath the big nickelled lamps. In addition to the reek of it, the place was filled with the smell of hot iron which an over-driven stove gives out, and the subtle odours of old skin coats.

The guests, however, were accustomed to an atmosphere of that kind, and it did not trouble them. For the most part, they were lean and spare, bronzed by frost and snow-blink, and straight of limb, for, though scarcely half of them were Canadian born, the prairie, as a rule, swiftly sets its stamp upon the newcomer. There was also something in the way they held themselves and put their feet down that suggested health and vigour, and, in the case of most of them, a certain alertness and decision of character. Some hailed from English cities, a few from those of Canada, and some from the bush of Ontario; but there was a similarity between them which the cut and tightness of their store clothing did not altogether account for. They lived well if plainly, and toiled out in the open unusually hard. Their eyes were steady, their bronzed skin was clear, and their laughter had a wholesome ring.

A fiery-haired Scot, a Highlander of the Isles, sat upon a barrel-head sawing at a fiddle, and the shrill scream of it filled the barn. Tone he did not aspire to, but he played with Caledonian verve and swing, and kept the snapping time. It was mad, harsh music of the kind that sets the blood tingling and the feet to move in rhythm, though the exhilarating effect of it was rather spoiled by the efforts of the little French Canadian who had another fiddle and threw in clanging chords upon the lower strings.

They were dancing in the cleared space what was presumably a quadrille, though it bore almost as great a resemblance to a Scottish country dance, or indeed to one of the measures of Bretonne France, which was, however, characteristic of the country. The Englishman has set no distinguishable impress upon the prairie. It has absorbed him with his reserve and sturdy industry, and the Canadian from the cities is apparently lost in it, too, for theirs is the leaven that works through the mass slowly

and unobtrusively, and it is the Scot and the habitant of French extraction who have given the life of it colour and individuality. Extremes meet and fuse on the wide white levels of the West.

It was, however, an Englishman who was the life of that dance, and he was physically a bigger man than most of the rest, for as a rule, at least, the Colonial born run to wiry hardness rather than solidity of frame. Gregory Hawtrey was tall and thick of shoulder, though the rest of him was in fine modelling, and he had a pleasant face of the English blue-eyed type. Just then it was suffused with almost boyish merriment, and indeed an irresponsible gaiety was a salient characteristic of the man. One would have called him handsome, though his mouth was a trifle slack, and there was a certain assurance in his manner that just fell short of swagger. He was the kind of man one likes at first sight, but for all that not the kind his hard-bitten neighbours would have chosen to stand by them through the strain of drought and frost in adverse seasons.

As it happened, the grim, hard-faced Sager, who had come there from Michigan, was just then talking to Stukely about him.

"Kind of tone about that man – guess he once had the gold-leaf on him quite thick, and it hasn't all worn off yet," he said. "Seen more Englishmen like him, and some folks from Noo York, too, when I took parties bass fishing way back yonder."

He waved his hand vaguely, as though to indicate the American Republic, and Stukely agreed with him. They were also right as far as they went, for Hawtrey undoubtedly possessed a grace of manner which, however, somehow failed to reach distinction. It was, perhaps, just a little too apparent, and lacked the strengthening feature of restraint.

"I wonder," said Stukely reflectively, "what those kind of fellows done before they came out here."

He had expressed a curiosity which is now and then to be met with on the prairie, but Sager, the charitable, grinned.

"Oh," he said, "I guess quite a few done no more than make their folks on the other side tired of them, and that's why they sent them out to you. Some of them get paid so much on condition that they don't come back again. Say" – and he glanced towards the dancers – "Dick Creighton's Sally seems quite stuck on Hawtrey by the way she's looking at him."

Stukely assented. He was a somewhat primitive person, as was Sally Creighton, for that matter, and he did not suppose she would have been greatly offended had she overheard his observations.

"Well," he said, "I've thought that, too. If she wants him she'll get him. She's a smart girl – Sally."

There were not many women present – perhaps one to every two of the men, which was, however, rather a large proportion in that country, and none of their garments were particularly elegant. The fabric was, for the most part, the cheapest obtainable, and they had fashioned it with their own fingers in the scanty interludes between washing, and baking, and mending their husbands' or fathers' clothes. Their faces were a trifle sallow and had lost their freshness in the dry heat of the stove. Their hands were hard and reddened, and in figure most of them were thin and spare. One could have fancied that in a land where everybody toiled strenuously their burden was the heavier. One or two of them had clearly been accustomed to a smoother life, but there was nothing to suggest that they looked back to it with regret. As a matter of fact, they looked forward, working for the future, and there was patient courage in their smiling eyes.

Creighton's Sally, who was then tripping through the measure on Hawtrey's arm, was native born. She was young and straight – straighter in outline than the women of the cities – with a suppleness which was less suggestive of the willow than a rather highly-tempered spring. She moved with a large vigour which only just fell short of grace, her eyes snapped when she smiled at Hawtrey, and her hair, which was of a ruddy brown, had fiery gleams in it. Anyone would have called her comely, and there was, indeed, no women in Stukely's barn to compare with her in that respect,

which was a fact she recognised, while every line and pose of her figure seemed expressive of an effervescent vitality.

"Oh yes," said Sager reflectively; "she'll get him sure if she sets her mind on it, and there's no denying that they make a handsome pair. I've nothing against Hawtrey either: a straight man, a hustler, and smart at handling a team. Still, it's kind of curious that while the man's never been stuck for the stamps like the rest of us, he's made nothing very much of his homestead yet. Now there's Bob, and Jake, and Jasper came in after he did with half the dollars, and they thrash out four bushels of hard wheat for Hawtrey's three."

Stukely made a little gesture of concurrence, for he dimly realised the significance of his companion's speech. It is results which count in that country, where the one thing demanded is practical efficiency, and the man of simple, steadfast purpose usually goes the farthest. Hawtrey had graces which won him friends, boldness of conception, and the power of application; but he had somehow failed to accomplish as much as his neighbours did. After all, there must be a good deal to be said for the man who raises four bushels of good wheat where his comrade with equal facilities raises three.

In the meanwhile Hawtrey was talking to Sally, and it was not astonishing that they talked of farming, which is the standard topic on that strip of prairie.

"So you're not going to break that new piece this spring?" she said.

"No," said Hawtrey; "I'd want another team, anyway, and I can't raise the dollars; they're hard to get out here."

"Plenty under the sod," said Sally, who was essentially practical. "That's where we get ours, but you have to put the breaker in and turn it over. You" – and she flashed a swift glance at him – "got most of yours from England. Won't they send you any more?"

Hawtrey's eyes twinkled as he shook his head. "I'm afraid they won't," he said. "You see, I've put the screw on them rather hard the last few years."

"How did you do that?" said Sally. "Told them you were thinking of coming home again?"

There was a certain wryness in her companion's smile, for though Hawtrey had cast no particular slur upon the family's credit he had signally failed to enhance it, and he was quite aware that his English relatives did not greatly desire his presence in the Old Country.

"My dear," he said, "you really shouldn't hit a fellow in the eye that way."

As it happened, he did not see the girl's face just then, or he might have noticed a momentary change in its expression. Gregory Hawtrey was a little casual in speech, but so far most of the young women he bestowed an epithet of that kind upon had attached no significance to it. They had wisely decided that he did not mean anything. In another moment or two the Scottish fiddler's voice broke in.

"Can ye no' watch the music? Noo it's paddybash!" he cried.

His French Canadian comrade waved his fiddle-bow protestingly.

"Paddybashy! *V'la la belle chose!*" he said with ineffable contempt, and broke in upon the ranting melody with a succession of harsh, crashing chords.

Then it apparently became a contest as to which could drown the other's instrument, and the snapping time grew faster, until the dancers gasped, and men with long boots encouraged them with cries and stamped a staccato accompaniment upon the benches or on the floor. It was savage, rasping music, but one player infused into it the ebullient verve of France, and the other was from the misty land where the fiddler learns the witchery of the clanging reel and the swing of the Strathspey. It is doubtless not high art, but there is probably no music in the world that fires the blood like this and turns the sober dance to rhythmic riot. Perhaps, too, it gains something that gives it a closer compelling grip amidst the prairie snow.

Hawtrey, at least, was breathless when it ceased, and Sally's eyes flashed with the effulgence of the Northern night when her partner found her a resting-place upon an upturned barrel.

"No," she said, "I won't have any cider." She turned and glanced at him imperiously. "You're not going for any more either."

It was, no doubt, not the speech a well-trained English maiden would have made, but, though Hawtrey smiled rather curiously, it fell inoffensively from Sally's lips. Though it is not always set down to their credit, the brown-faced, hard-handed men as a rule live very abstemiously in that country, and, as it happened, Hawtrey, who, however, certainly showed no sign of it, had already consumed rather more cider than anybody else. He made a little sign of submission, and Sally resumed their conversation where it had broken off.

"We could let you have our ox-team to do that breaking with," she said. "You've had Sproatly living with you all winter. Why don't you make him stay and work out his keep?"

Hawtrey laughed. "Sally," he said, "do you think anybody could make Sproatly work?"

"It would be hard," the girl admitted, and then looked up at him with a little glint in her eyes. "Still, I'd put a move on him if you sent him along to me."

She was a rather capable young woman, but Hawtrey was very dubious of her ability to accomplish as much as this. Sproatly was an Englishman of good education, though his appearance seldom suggested it, who drove about the prairie in a waggon vending cheap oleographs and patent medicines most of the summer, and contrived to obtain free quarters from his bachelor acquaintances during the winter. It is a hospitable country, but there were men round Lander's who when they went away to work in far-off lumber camps, as they sometimes did, nailed up their doors and windows to prevent Sproatly getting in.

"Does he never do anything?" Sally added.

"No," said Hawtrey; "at least, never when he can help it. He had, however, started something shortly before I left him. You see, the house has wanted cleaning the last month or two, and we tossed up for who should do it. It fell to Sproatly, who didn't seem quite pleased, but he got as far as firing the chairs and tables out into the snow. Then he sat down for a smoke, and he was looking at them through the window when I drove away."

"Ah," said his companion, "you want somebody to keep the house straight and look after you. Didn't you know any nice girls back there in the Old Country?"

It was spoken naturally, and there was nothing to show that the girl's heart beat a little more rapidly than usual as she watched her companion. His face, however, grew a trifle graver, for she had touched upon a rather momentous question to such men as him. There are a good many of them living in Spartan simplicity upon the prairie, well-trained, well-connected young Englishmen, and others like them from Canadian cities. They naturally look for some grace of culture or refinement in the woman they would marry, and there are few women of the station they once belonged to who could face the loneliness and unassisted drudgery that must be borne by the small wheat-grower's wife. There were also reasons why this question had been troubling Hawtrey in particular of late.

"Oh, yes, one or two," he said. "I'm not quite sure, however, that girls of that kind would find things even moderately comfortable here."

There was a certain reflectiveness in his tone, which, since it seemed to indicate that he had already given the point some consideration, jarred upon his companion. She had also an ample share of the Western farmer's pride, which firmly declines to believe that there is any land to compare with the one the plough is slowly wresting from the wide white levels of the prairie.

"We make out well enough," she said with a snap in her eyes.

Hawtrey made a little whimsical gesture. "Oh, yes," he admitted; "it's in you. All you want to beat the wilderness and turn it into a garden is an axe, a span of oxen, and a breaker plough. You ought to be proud of it. Still, you see, our folks back yonder aren't quite the same as you."

Sally partly understood him. "Ah," she said, "they want more, and, perhaps, they're used to having more than we have; but isn't that in one way their misfortune? Is it what folks want, or what they can do, that makes them of use to anybody else?"

There was a hard truth in her suggestion, but Hawtrey, who seldom occupied himself with matters of that kind, smiled.

"Oh," he said, "I don't know; but, after all, it wouldn't be worth while our raising wheat here unless there were folks back East to eat it, and if some of them only eat it in the shape of dainty cakes that doesn't affect the question. Anyway, there's only another dance or two, and I was wondering whether I could drive you home; I've got Wyllard's Ontario sleigh."

Sally glanced at him rather sharply. She had half-expected this offer, and it is possible would have judiciously led him up to it if he had not made it. Now, as she saw that he really wished to drive her home, she was glad that she had not done so.

"Yes," she said softly, "I think you could."

"Then," said Hawtrey, "if you'll wait ten minutes I'll be back with the team."

CHAPTER II.
SALLY TAKES CHARGE

The night was clear and bitterly cold when Hawtrey and Sally Creighton drove away from Stukely's barn. Winter had lingered unusually long that year, and the prairie gleamed dimly white, with the sledge trail cutting athwart it, a smear of blue-grey, in the foreground. It was – for Lander's lay behind them with the snow among the stubble belts that engirdled it – an empty wilderness the mettlesome team swung across, and during the first few minutes the cold struck through them with a sting like the thrust of steel. A half-moon hung low above it, coppery red with frost, and there was no sound but the crunch beneath the runners, and the beat of hoofs that rang dully through the silence like a roll of muffled drums.

Sleighs like the one that Hawtrey drove are not common on the prairie, where the farmer generally uses the humble bob-sled when the snow lies unusually long. The one in question had, however, been made for use in Montreal, and bought back East by a friend of Hawtrey's, who was, as it happened, possessed of some means, which is a somewhat unusual thing in the case of a Western wheat-grower. He had also bought the team – the fastest he could obtain – and when the warmth came back to them Hawtrey and the girl became conscious of the exhilaration of the swift and easy motion. The sleigh was light and narrow, and Hawtrey, who drew the thick driving robe higher about his companion, did not immediately draw the mittened hand he had used back again. The girl did not resent the fact that it still rested behind her shoulder, nor did Hawtrey attach any particular significance to the matter. He was a man who usually acted on impulse, with singularly easy manners. How far Sally understood him did not appear, but she came of folk who had waged a very stubborn battle with the wilderness, and there was a vein of somewhat grim tenacity in her.

She was, however, conscious that there was something beneath her feet which forced her, if she was to sit comfortably, rather close against her companion; and it seemed expedient to point it out.

"Can't you move a little? I can't get my feet fixed right," she said.

Hawtrey looked down at her with a smile. "I'm afraid I can't unless I get right outside. Aren't you happy there?"

It was the kind of speech he was in the habit of making, but there was rather more colour in the girl's face than the stinging night air brought there, and she glanced at the bottom of the sleigh.

"It's a sack of some kind, isn't it?" she said.

"Yes," said Hawtrey; "it's a couple of three-bushel bags. Some special seed wheat Lorton sent to Winnipeg for. Ormond brought them out from the railroad. I promised I'd take them along to him."

"You should have told me. It's most a league round by Lorton's place," said Sally.

"That won't take long with this team. Have you any great objections to another fifteen minutes' drive with me?"

Sally looked up at him, and the moonlight was on her face, which was a very comely one.

"No," she admitted, "I haven't any."

She said it demurely, but there was a just perceptible something in her voice which might have warned the man had he been addicted to taking warning from anything, which was, however, not the case. It was, in fact, his trouble that he seldom thought about what he did until he was compelled to face the consequences; and it was, perhaps, to his credit that he had after all done very little harm, for there was hot blood in him.

"Well," he said, "I'm not going to grumble about those extra three miles, but you were asking what land I meant to break this spring. What put that into your mind?"

"Our folks," said Sally candidly. "They were talking about you."

This again was significant, but Hawtrey did not notice it.

"I've no doubt they said I ought to tackle the new quarter section?" he suggested.

"Yes," assented Sally. "Why don't you do it? Last fall you thrashed out quite a big harvest."

"I certainly did. There, however, didn't seem to be many dollars left over when I'd faced the bills."

The girl made a little gesture of impatience. "Oh," she said, "Bob and Jake and Jasper sowed on less backsetting, and they're buying new teams and ploughs. Can't you do what they do, though I guess they don't go off for weeks to Winnipeg?"

The man was silent. He had an incentive to work hard which she was not acquainted with, and he had certainly done so, but the long, iron winter, when there was nothing that could be done, had proved too much for him. It was very dreary sitting alone evening after evening beside the stove, and the company of the somnolent Sproatly was not much more cheerful. Now and then his pleasure-loving nature had revolted from the barrenness of his lot when he drove home from an odd visit to a neighbour, stiff with cold, through the stinging frost, and, arriving in the dark, found the stove had burned out and water frozen hard inside the house. These were things his neighbours patiently endured, but Hawtrey had fled for life and brightness to Winnipeg.

Sally glanced up at him with a little nod. "You take hold with a good grip. Everybody allows that," she said. "The trouble is you let things go afterwards. You don't stay with it."

"Yes," assented Hawtrey. "I believe you have hit it, Sally. That's very much what's the matter with me."

"Then," said the girl with quiet insistence, "won't you try?"

A faint flush crept into Hawtrey's face. The girl was less than half-taught, and unacquainted with anything beyond the simple, strenuous life of the prairie. Her greatest accomplishments consisted of some skill in bakery and the handling of half-broken teams; but she had once or twice given him what he recognised as excellent advice. There was something incongruous in the situation, but, as usual, he preferred to regard it whimsically.

"I suppose I'll have to, if you insist. If ever I'm the grasping owner of the biggest farm in this district I'll blame you," he said.

Sally said nothing further on that subject, and some time later the sleigh went skimming down among the birches in a shallow ravine. Hawtrey pulled the horses up when they reached the bottom of it, and glanced up at a shapeless cluster of buildings that showed black amidst the trees.

"Lorton won't be back until to-morrow, but I promised to pitch the bags into his granary," he said. "If I hump them up the trail here it will save us driving round through the bluff."

He got down, and though the bags were heavy he managed to hoist the first of them on to his shoulders, with Sally's assistance, and then staggered up the steep foot-trail that climbed the slope with it. He was more or less accustomed to carrying bags of grain between store and waggon, but his mittened hands were numbed, and his joints were stiff with frost just then, and Sally noticed that he floundered rather wildly. In another moment or two, however, he vanished into the gloom among the trees, and she sat listening to the uneven crunch of his footsteps in the snow, until there was a sudden crash of broken branches, and a sound as of something falling heavily down a declivity. Then there was another crash, and stillness again.

Sally gasped, and clenched her mittened hands hard upon the reins as she remembered that Lorton's bye trail skirted the edge of a very steep bank, but she lost neither her collectedness nor her nerve. Presence of mind in the face of an emergency is probably as much a question of experience as of temperament, and, as it happened, she had, like other women in that country, seen men struck down by half-trained horses, crushed by collapsing strawpiles, and once or twice gashed by a mower blade. This was no doubt why she remembered that the impatient team would probably move on if she left the sleigh, and she drove them to the first of the birches before she got down. Then she knotted the reins about a branch, and called out sharply.

No answer came out of the shadows, and her heart beat unpleasantly fast as she plunged in among the trees, keeping below the narrow trail that went slanting up the side of the declivity, until she stopped, with another gasp, when she reached a spot where a ray of moonlight came filtering down. A limp figure in an old skin coat lay almost at her feet, and she dropped on her knees beside it in the snow. Hawtrey's face showed an unpleasant greyish-white in the faint silvery light.

"Gregory!" she cried hoarsely.

The man opened his eyes, and blinked at her in a half-dazed manner. "Fell down," he said. "Think I felt my leg go – and my side's stabbing me. Go for somebody."

Sally glanced round, and noticed that the grain bag lay burst open not far away. She fancied that he had clung to it after he lost his footing, which explained why he had fallen so heavily, but that was not a point of any consequence now. There was nobody who could help her within two leagues of the spot, and it was evident that she could not leave him there to freeze. Then she noticed that the trees grew rather farther apart just there, and rising swiftly she ran back to bring the team. The ascent was steep, and she had to urge them up it with sharp cries and blows with her mittened hand amidst the shadowy trunks and through snapping undergrowth before she reached the spot where Hawtrey lay. He looked up at her when at last they stood snorting close beside him.

"You can't turn them here," he said.

Sally was never sure how she managed it, for the sleigh drove against the slender trunks, and the fiery beasts, terrified by the snapping of the undergrowth, were almost unmanageable; but at last they were facing the descent again, and she stooped and twined her arms about the shoulders of her companion, who now lay almost against the sleigh.

"It's going to hurt, Gregory, but I have got to get you in," she said.

Then she gasped, for Hawtrey was a man of full stature, and it was a heavy lift. She could not raise him wholly, and he cried out once when his injured leg trailed in the snow. Still, with the most strenuous effort she had ever made she moved him a yard or so, and then staggering fell with her side against the sleigh. She felt faint with the pain of it, but with another desperate lift she drew him into the sleigh, and let him sink down gently upon the bag that still lay there. His eyes had shut again, and he said nothing now.

It took only another moment or two to wrap the thick driving robe about him, and after that she glanced down, with one hand still beneath his neck. It was clear that he was quite unconscious of her presence, and stooping swiftly she kissed his grey face. Then she settled herself in the driving seat with only a blanket coat to shelter her from the stinging frost, and the horses went cautiously down the slope. She did not urge them until they reached the level, for the trail that wound up out of the ravine was difficult, but when the wide white expanse once more stretched away before them she laid the biting whip across their backs.

That was quite sufficient. They were fiery beasts, and when they broke into a furious gallop the rush of night wind that screamed by struck her tingling cheeks like a lash of wires. Then all power of feeling went out of her hands, her arms grew stiff and heavy, and she was glad that the trail led smooth and straight to the horizon. Hawtrey, who had moved a little, lay, a shapeless figure, across her feet, but he answered nothing when she spoke to him.

The team went far at the gallop, and the beat of hoofs rose up, dulled a little, in a wild staccato drumming. There was an insistent crunching beneath the runners, and a fine mist of snow beat against the sleigh, but the girl leaning forward, a tense figure, with nerveless hands clenched upon the reins, saw nothing but the blue-grey riband of trail that steadily unrolled itself before her. At length, however, a blurred mass, which she knew to be a birch bluff, grew out of the white waste, and presently a cluster of darker smudges shot up into the shape of a log-house, sod stables, and strawpile granary. A minute or two later, she pulled the team up with an effort, and a man, who flung the door of the house open, came out into the moonlight. He stopped, and apparently gazed at her in astonishment.

"Miss Creighton!" he said.

"Don't stand there," said Sally. "Take the near horse's head, and lead them right up to the door."

"What's the matter?" the man asked stupidly.

"Lead the team up," said Sally. "Jump, if you can."

It was supposed on that part of the prairie that Sproatly had never moved with much expedition in his life, but that night he sprang towards the horses at a commanding wave of the girl's hand. He started when he saw his comrade lying in the bottom of the sleigh, but Sally disregarded his hurried questions.

"Help me to get him out," she said, when he stopped the team. "Keep his right leg as straight as you can. I don't want to lift him. We must slide him in."

They did it somehow, though the girl was breathless before their task, which the snow made a little easier, was finished, and the perspiration started from the man. Then Sally turned to the latter.

"Get into the sleigh, and don't spare the team," she said. "Drive over to Watson's, and bring him along. You can tell him your partner's broke his leg, and some of his ribs. Start right now!"

Sproatly did her bidding, and when the door closed behind him she flung off her blanket coat and thrust fresh billets into the stove. Then she looked for some coffee in the store cupboard, and set on a kettle; after which she sat down on the floor by Hawtrey's side. He lay still, with the thick driving robe beneath him, and though the colour was creeping back into his face, his eyes were shut, and he was apparently quite insensible of her presence. For the first time she was conscious of a distressful faintness, which, as she had come suddenly out of the stinging frost into the little overheated room, which reeked with tobacco smoke and a stale smell of cooking, was not astonishing. She mastered it, however, and presently, seeing that Hawtrey did not move; glanced about her with some curiosity, for this was the first time she had entered his house.

The room was scantily furnished, and, though very few of the bachelor farmers in that country live luxuriously, she fancied that Sproatly, who had evidently very rudimentary ideas on the subject of house-cleaning, had not brought back all the sundries he had thrown out into the snow. It then contained a table, a carpenter's bench, and a couple of chairs, and there were still smears of dust upon the uncovered floor. The birch-log walls had been rudely panelled with match-boarding half-way up, which was a somewhat unusual luxury, but the half-seasoned boards had rent with the heat, and exuded streaks of resin to which the grime and dust had clung. A pail, which apparently contained potato peelings, stood amidst a litter of old long boots and broken harness against one wall, and the floor was black and thick with grease all round the rusty stove. A pile of unwashed dishes and cooking utensils stood upon the table, and the lamp above her head had blackened the boarded ceiling, and diffused a subtle odour of kerosene.

Sally noticed it all with disgust, and then, seeing that Hawtrey had opened his eyes, she made a cup of coffee and got him to drink it. After that he smiled at her.

"Thanks," he said feebly. "Where's Sproatly? My side stabs me."

Sally raised one hand. "You're not to say a word. Sproatly's gone for Watson, and he'll soon fix you up. Now lie quite still, and shut your eyes again."

The man obeyed her, in so far as that he lay still, but his eyes were not more than half-closed, and she could not resist the temptation to see what he would do if she went away. She had half risen, when he stretched a hand out and felt for her dress, and she sank down again with a curious softness in her face. Then he let his eyes close altogether, as if satisfied, and by and bye she gently laid her hand on his.

He did not appear to notice it, and, though she did not know whether he was asleep or unconscious, she sat beside him, with compassion in her eyes. There was no sound but the snapping of the birch billets in the rusty stove. She was anxious, but not unduly so, for she knew that men who live as the prairie farmers do, usually recover from such injuries as had befallen him more or less readily. It would also not be very long before assistance arrived, for it was understood that the man

she had sent Sproatly for had almost gone through a medical course in an Eastern city before he set up as a prairie farmer. Why he had suddenly changed his profession was a point he did not explain, and, as he had always shown himself willing to do what he could when any of his neighbours met with an accident, nobody troubled him about the matter.

By and bye Sproatly brought him to the homestead, and he was busy with Hawtrey for some time. Then they got him to bed, and Watson came back to the room where Sally was anxiously waiting.

"His idea about his injuries is more or less correct, but we'll have no great trouble in pulling him round," he said. "The one point that's worrying me is the looking after him. One couldn't expect him to thrive upon slabs of burnt salt pork, and Sproatly's bread."

"I'll do what I can," said Sproatly indignantly.

"You!" said the other. "It would be criminal to leave you in charge of a sick man."

Sally quietly put on her blanket coat. "If you can stay that long, I'll be back soon after it's light," she said. Then she turned to Sproatly. "You can wash up those dishes on the table, and get a brush and sweep this room out. If it's not quite smart to-morrow you'll do it again."

Then, while Sproatly grinned, she went out and drove away through the bitter frost.

CHAPTER III.
WYLLARD ASSENTS

Sally, who brought her mother with her, spent a couple of weeks at Hawtrey's homestead before Watson decided that his patient could be entrusted to Sproatly's care; but she came back afterwards twice a week or so with odd baskets of dainties to make sure that the latter, in whom she had no confidence, was discharging his duties satisfactorily. She had driven over again one afternoon, when Hawtrey, whose bones were knitting well, lay talking to another man in his little sleeping room.

There was no furniture in it whatever, beyond the wooden bunk he lay in, and a deerhide lounge chair he had made during the winter; but the stovepipe from the kitchen led across part of it, and then up again into the room beneath the roof above. It had been one of Sproatly's duties during the past two weeks to rise and renew the fire when the cold awakened his comrade soon after midnight. At present he was outside the house, whipsawing birch-logs and splitting them into billets, which was an occupation he cherished a profound dislike for.

Spring had, however, come suddenly, as it usually does on the prairie, a few days earlier, and the snow was melting fast under a brilliant sun. The bright rays that streamed in through the window struck athwart the glimmering dust motes in the little bare room, and fell, pleasantly warm, upon the man who lay in the deerhide chair. He was a year or two older than Hawtrey, though he had scarcely reached thirty, a man of tranquil manner, with a rather lean and deeply bronzed face, of average height, and somewhat spare of figure. He held a pipe in his hand, and was then looking at Hawtrey with quiet, contemplative eyes. They were, indeed, his most noticeable feature, though it was difficult to say whether their colour was grey or hazel-brown, for they were singularly clear, and there was something which suggested steadfastness in their unwavering gaze. He wore long boots, trousers of old blue duck, and a jacket of soft deerskin such as the Blackfeet dress; and there was nothing about him to suggest that he was a man of varied experience, and of some importance in that country.

Harry Wyllard was native-born, and had in his young days assisted his father in the working of a little Manitoban farm, when that great grain province was still, for the most part, a wilderness. Then a more prosperous relative on the Pacific slope had sent him to Toronto University, where after a session or two he had become involved in a difference of opinion with the authorities. Though the matter was never made quite clear, it was generally believed that Wyllard had quietly borne the blame of a comrade's action, for there was a vein of eccentric generosity in the lad. In any case, he left Toronto, and the relative, who was largely interested in the fur business, next sent him north to the Behring Sea, in one of his schooners. The business was then a remarkably hazardous one, for the skin buyers and pelagic sealers had trouble all round with the Alaskan representatives of American trading companies, whose preserves they poached upon, as well as with the commanders of the gunboats sent up there to protect the seals.

Men's lives were staked against the value of a fur, edicts were lightly contravened, and now and then a schooner barely escaped into the smothering fog with skins looted close aboard forbidden beaches. It was a perilous life, and a strenuous one, for they had every white man's hand against them, as well as fog and gale, and the reefs that lay in the tideways of almost uncharted waters; but Wyllard made the most of it. He kept the peace with jealous skippers who resented the presence of a man they might command as mate, but whose views they were forced to listen to when he spoke as supercargo; won the good-will of sea-bred Indians, and drove a good trade with them; and not infrequently brought his boat back first to the plunging schooner loaded with reeking skins.

Then he fell into trouble again when they were hanging off the Eastern Isles under double reefs, watching for the Russians' seals. A boat's crew from another schooner had been cast ashore, and, as they were in peril of falling into the Russians' hands, Wyllard led a reckless boat expedition

to bring them off again. He succeeded, in so far that the wrecked men were taken off the roaring beach through a tumult of breaking surf, but as they pulled seaward the fog shut down on them, and one boat, manned by three men, never reached the schooners. They blew horns all night, standing off and on, and crept along the smoking beach next day, though the surf made landing impossible. Then a sudden gale drove them off the shore, and, as it was evident that their comrades must have perished, they reluctantly sailed for other fishing grounds. As one result of this, Wyllard broke with his prosperous relative when he came back to Vancouver.

After that he helped to strengthen railroad bridges among the mountains of British Columbia, worked in logging camps, and shovelled in the mines, and, as it happened, met Hawtrey, who, tempted by high wages, had spent a winter in the Mountain Province after a disastrous harvest. In the meanwhile, his father had sold out, and taken up virgin soil in Assiniboia. He died soon after Wyllard went back to him, and a few months later the relative in Vancouver also died. Somewhat to Wyllard's astonishment, he bequeathed him a considerable property, which the latter realised and sunk most of the proceeds in further acres of virgin prairie. Willow Range was already one of the largest farms between Winnipeg and the Rockies.

"The leg's getting along satisfactorily?" he said at length.

Hawtrey, who appeared unusually thoughtful, admitted that it was.

"Any way, it's singularly unfortunate that I'm broken up just now," he added. "There's the ploughing to commence in a week or two, and, besides that, I was thinking of getting married."

Wyllard was somewhat astonished at this announcement. For one thing, he was more or less acquainted with the state of his friend's finances. During the next moment or two he glanced meditatively through the open door into the adjoining room, where Sally Creighton was busy beside the stove. The sleeves of her light bodice were rolled up well above the elbow, and she had pretty, round arms, which were just then partly immersed in dough.

"I don't think there's a nicer or more capable girl in this part of Assiniboia," he said.

"Oh, yes," said Hawtrey. "Anybody would admit that. Still, since you seem so sure of it, why don't you marry her yourself?"

Wyllard looked at his comrade rather curiously. "Well," he said, "there are one or two reasons that don't affect Miss Sally and only concern myself. Besides, it's highly improbable that she'd have me."

He paused to light his pipe, which had gone out, before he looked up again. "Since it evidently isn't Sally, have I met the lady?"

"You haven't. She's in England."

"It's four years, isn't it, since you were over there?"

Hawtrey lay silent a minute, and then made a little confidential gesture. "I'd better tell you all about the thing," he said. "Our folks were people of some little standing in the county. In fact, as they were far from rich, they had just standing enough to embarrass them. In most respects they were ultra-conventional with old-fashioned ideas, and, though there was no open break, I'm afraid I didn't get on with them quite as well as I should have done, which is why I came out to Canada. They started me on the land decently, and twice when we'd harvest frost and horse-sickness, they sent the draft I asked them for along. That is one reason why I'm not going to worry them, though I'd very much like another now. You see, there are two girls, as well as Reggie, who's reading for the Bar."

"I don't think you have mentioned the lady yet."

"She's a connection of some friends of ours. Her mother, so far as I understand it, married beneath her – a man her folks didn't like. He died, and, when by and bye his wife died, Agatha, who was brought up by his relations, was often at the Grange. It's a little, old-fashioned, half-ruinous place, a mile or two from where we live in the North of England. It belongs to her mother's folks, but I think there was still a feud between them and her father's people, who brought her up to earn her living. We saw a good deal of each other, and fell in love as boy and girl. Well, when I went back,

one winter, after I'd been here two years, Agatha was at the Grange again, and we decided then that I was to bring her out as soon as I had a home she could live in to offer her."

He broke off for a moment, and there was a trace of embarrassment in his manner when he went on again. "Perhaps I ought to have managed it sooner," he added. "Still, things never seem to go quite as one would like with me, and you can understand that a dainty, delicate girl brought up in comfort in England would find it rough out here."

Wyllard glanced round the bare room in which he sat, and into the other, which was also furnished in a remarkably primitive manner.

"Yes," he assented, "I can quite realise that."

"Well," said his companion, "it's a thing that has been worrying me a good deal of late, because, as a matter of fact, I'm not much farther forward than I was four years ago. In the meanwhile, Agatha, who has some talent for music, was in a first-class master's hands. Afterwards she gave lessons, and got odd singing engagements. A week ago, I had a letter from her in which she said that her throat was giving out."

He stopped again for a moment, with trouble in his face, and then fumbling under his pillow produced a letter, which he carefully folded.

"We're rather good friends," he said. "You can read that part of it."

Wyllard took the letter, and a suggestion of quickening interest crept into his eyes as he read. Then he looked up at Hawtrey.

"It's a brave letter – the kind a brave girl would write," he said. "Still, it's evident that she's anxious."

There was silence for a moment or two, which was only broken by Sally clattering about the stove. Dissimilar in character, as they were, the two were firm friends, and there had been a day when, as they worked upon a dizzy railroad trestle, Hawtrey had held his comrade fast when a plank slipped away. He had, it was characteristic, thought nothing of the matter, but Wyllard was one who remembered things of that kind.

"Now," said Hawtrey, "you see my trouble. This place isn't fit for her, and I couldn't even go across for some time yet, but her father's folks have died off, and there's nothing to be expected from her mother's relatives. Any way, she can't be left to face the blow alone. It's unthinkable. Well, there's only one course open to me, and that's to raise as many dollars on a mortgage as I can, fit the place out with fixings brought from Winnipeg, and sow a double acreage with borrowed capital. I'll send for her as soon as I can get the house made a little more comfortable."

Wyllard sat silent a moment or two, and then leaned forward in his chair.

"No," he said, "there are two other and wiser courses. Tell the girl what things are like here, and just how you stand. She'd face it bravely. There's no doubt of that."

Hawtrey looked at him sharply. "I believe she would, but considering that you have never seen her, I don't quite know why you should be sure of it."

Wyllard smiled. "The girl who wrote that letter wouldn't flinch."

"Well," said Hawtrey, "you can mention the second course."

"I'll let you have $1,000 at bank interest – which is less than any land-broker would charge you – without a mortgage."

Again Hawtrey showed a certain embarrassment. "No," he said, "I'm afraid it can't be done. I'd a kind of claim upon my people, though it must be admitted that I've worked it off, but I can't quite bring myself to borrow money from my friends."

Wyllard, who saw that he meant it, made a gesture of resignation. "Then you must let the girl make the most of it, but keep out of the hands of the mortgage man. By the way, I haven't told you that I've decided to make a trip to the Old Country. We'd a bonanza crop last season, and Martial could run the range for a month or two. After all, my father was born yonder, and I can't help feeling

now and then that I should have made an effort to trace up that young Englishman's relatives, and tell them what became of him."

"The one you struck in British Columbia? You have mentioned him, but, so far as I remember, you never gave me any particulars about the thing."

Wyllard seemed to hesitate, which was not a habit of his. "There is," he said, "not much to tell. I struck the lad sitting down, played out, upon a trail that led over a big divide. It was clear that he couldn't get any further, and there wasn't a settlement within a good many leagues of the spot. We were up in the ranges prospecting then. Well, we made camp and gave him supper – he couldn't eat very much – and he told me what brought him there afterwards. It seemed to me he'd always been weedy in the chest, but he'd been working waist-deep in an icy creek, building a dam at a mine, until his lungs had given out. The mining boss was a hard case and had no mercy on him, but the lad, who seemed to have had a rough time in the Mountain Province, stayed with it until he played out altogether."

Wyllard's face hardened a little as he mentioned the mining boss, and a rather curious little sparkle crept into his eyes, but after a pause he proceeded quietly:

"We did what we could for him. In fact, it rather broke up the prospecting trip, but he was too far through," he added. "He hung on for a week or two, and one of us brought a doctor out from the settlements, but the day before we broke camp Jake and I buried him."

Hawtrey made a sign of comprehension. He was reasonably well acquainted with his comrade's character, and fancied he knew who had brought the doctor out. He also knew that Wyllard had been earning his living as a railroad navvy or chopper then, and, in view of the cost of provisions brought by pack-horse into the remoter bush, the reason why he had abandoned his prospecting trip after spending a week or two taking care of the sick lad was clear enough.

"You never learned his name?" he asked.

"I didn't," said Wyllard. "I went back to the mine, but several things suggested that the name upon their pay-roll wasn't his real one. He commenced a broken message the night he died, but the hemorrhage cut him off in the middle of it. The wish that I should tell his people somehow was in his eyes."

He broke off for a moment with a deprecatory gesture, which in connection with the story was very expressive.

"I have never done it, but how could I? All I know is that he was a delicately brought up young Englishman, and the only clue I have is a watch with a London maker's name on it and a girl's photograph. I've a very curious notion that I shall meet that girl some day."

Hawtrey, who made no comment, lay still for a minute or two after this, but his face suggested that he was considering something.

"Harry," he said presently, "I shall not be fit for a journey for quite a while yet, and if I went over to England I couldn't get the ploughing done and the crop in; which, if I'm going to be married, is absolutely necessary."

There was no doubt about the latter point, for the small Western farmer has very seldom a balance in hand, and, for that matter, is not infrequently in debt to the nearest storekeeper. He must, as a rule, secure a harvest or abandon his holding, since, as soon as the crop is thrashed, the bills pour in. Wyllard made a sign of assent.

"Well," said Hawtrey, "if you're going to England you could go as my deputy. You could make Agatha understand what things are like here, and bring her out to me. I'll arrange for the wedding to be soon as she arrives."

His comrade was not a conventional person, but he pointed out several objections. Hawtrey over-ruled them, however, and eventually Wyllard reluctantly assented.

"As it happens, Mrs. Hastings is going over, too, and if she comes back about the same time the thing might be managed," he said. "I believe she's in Winnipeg just now, but I'll write her. By the way, have you a photograph of Agatha?"

"I haven't," said Hawtrey. "She gave me one, but somehow it got mislaid one house-cleaning. That's rather an admission, isn't it?"

It certainly occurred to Wyllard that it was. In fact, it struck him as a very curious thing that Hawtrey should have lost the picture which the girl he was in love with had given him. He sat silent for a moment or two, and then stood up.

"When I hear from Mrs. Hastings I'll drive round again. Candidly, the thing has somewhat astonished me. I always had a fancy it would be Sally."

Hawtrey laughed. "Sally?" he said. "We're first-rate friends, but I never had the faintest notion of marrying her."

Wyllard went out to harness his team, and, as it happened, did not notice that Sally, who had approached the door with a tray in her hands a moment or two earlier, drew back before him softly. When he had crossed the room she set down the tray and leaned upon the table, with her cheeks burning. Then, feeling that she could not stay in the stove-heated room, she went out, and stood in the slushy snow. One of her hands was tightly closed, and all the colour had vanished from her cheeks now. She, however, contrived to give Hawtrey his supper by and bye, and soon afterwards drove away.

CHAPTER IV.
A CRISIS

While Wyllard made arrangements for his journey, and Sally Creighton went very quietly about her work on the lonely prairie farm, it happened one evening that Miss Winifred Rawlinson sat uneasily expectant far back under the gallery of a concert hall in an English manufacturing town. She could not hear very well there, but it was the cheapest place she could obtain, and economy was of some importance to her. Besides, by craning her neck a little to avoid the hat of the rather strikingly dressed young woman in front of her, she could, at least, see the stage. The programme which she held in one hand announced that Miss Agatha Ismay would sing a certain aria from a great composer's oratorio, and she leaned further forward in her chair when a girl of about her own age, which was twenty-four, slowly advanced to the centre of the stage.

She was a tall, well-made, brown-haired girl, with a quiet grace of movement and a comely face, attired in a long trailing dress of a shimmering corn-straw tint, but when she stood looking at the audience Miss Rawlinson noticed a hint of tension in her expression. Agatha Ismay had sung at unimportant concerts with marked success, but that evening there was something very like shrinking in her eyes.

Then a crash of chords from the piano melted into a rippling prelude, and Winifred breathed easier when her friend began to sing. Her voice was sweet and excellently trained, and there was a deep stillness of appreciation when the clear notes thrilled through the close-packed hall. No one could doubt that the first part of the aria was a success, for half-subdued applause broke out when the voice sank into silence, and for a few moments the piano rippled on alone; but it seemed to Winifred that the look of tension was still in the singer's face, and once more she grew uneasy, for she understood the cause for it.

"The last bit of the second part's rather trying," said a young man behind her. "There's an awkward jump of two full tones that was too much for our soprano when we tried it at the choral union. Miss Ismay's very true in intonation, but I don't suppose most of the rest would notice it if she shirked a little and left that high sharp out."

Winifred had little knowledge of music, but she was sufficiently acquainted with her friend's character to be certain that Agatha would not attempt to leave the sharp in question out. This was one reason why she sat rigidly still when the clear voice rang out again. It rose from note to note, full and even, but she could see the singer's face, and there was no doubt whatever that she was making a strenuous effort. Nobody else, however, seemed to notice it, for Winifred flung a swift glance round, and then fixed her eyes upon the dominant figure in the corn-straw dress that the glare of light fell shimmering on. The sweet voice was still rising, and she longed that the accompanist would force the tone to cover it a little, and put the loud pedal on. He, however, was gazing at his music, and played on quietly until, with startling suddenness, the climax came.

The voice sank a full tone, jarring horribly on the theme, rose, and hoarsely trailed off into silence again. Then the accompanist glanced over his shoulder, and struck a ringing chord while he waited for a sign, and there was a curious stirring among the audience. The girl in the shimmering dress stood quite still for a moment with a spot of crimson in her cheek and a half-dazed look in her eyes, and then, turning swiftly, moved off the stage.

Then Winifred rose with a gasp, and turned upon the young man next her, who looked up inquiringly.

"Yes," she said sharply; "can't you let me pass? I'm going out."

It was about half-past nine when she reached the wet and miry street. A fine rain drove into her face, and she had rather more than a mile to walk without an escort, but that was a matter which caused

her no concern. She was a self-reliant young woman, and accustomed to going about unattended, while she was also quite aware that the scene she had just witnessed would bring about a crisis in her and her friend's affairs. For all that, she was unpleasantly conscious of the leak in one rather shabby boot when she stepped down from the sidewalk to cross the street, and when she opened her umbrella beneath a gas lamp she pursed up her mouth. There were a couple of holes in it near where the ribs ran into the ferrule, which she had not noticed before. She, however, plodded on resolutely through the drizzle, until three striplings who came with linked arms down the pavement of a quieter street barred her way. One wore his hat on one side, the one nearest the kerb flourished a little cane, and the third of them smiled at her fatuously.

"Oh my!" he said. "Where's dear Jemima off in such a hurry?"

Winifred drew herself up. She was little and determined, and, it must be admitted, not quite unaccustomed to that kind of thing.

"Will you let me pass?" she said. "There's a policeman at the next turning."

"There really is," said one of them. "The Dook has another engagement. Dream of me, Olivia!"

A beat of heavy feet drew nearer, and the three roysterers disappeared in the direction of a flaming music-hall, where the second "house" was probably commencing, while Winifred, who had stepped into the gutter to avoid the one with the cane, turned as a stalwart, blue-coated figure moved towards her.

"Thank you, officer," she said; "they've gone."

The man merely raised a hand as if in comprehension, and plodded back to his post. Perhaps he felt sorry for young women who have to earn their living, for he had, at least, appeared promptly when he was needed; and perhaps he attached no great importance to the matter. There is a good deal that the policeman knows and accepts with undisturbed equanimity, which if plainly expressed would, no doubt, form a somewhat grim commentary on our complex civilisation.

In the meanwhile Winifred went on until she let herself into a house in a quiet street, and ascending to the second floor entered a simply furnished room. It, however, contained a piano; and a little table on which a typewriter stood amidst a litter of papers occupied the opposite side of it. The girl sloughed off her waterproof, and rather flung than hung it on a peg behind the door, after which she sat down in a low chair beside the little fire. She was not a handsome girl, and it was evident that she did not trouble herself greatly about her attire. Her face was too thin, her figure too slight and spare, but there was usually, even when she was anxious, as she certainly was that night, a shrewdly whimsical twinkle in her eyes, and though her lips were set her expression was compassionate.

She was, however, not the person to sit still very long, and in a minute or two she rose and placed a little kettle on the fire, after which she took a few scones, a coffee-pot, and a tin of condensed milk from a cupboard. When she had spread them out upon a table she discovered that there was some of the condensed milk upon her fingers, and it must be admitted that she sucked them. They were little, stubby fingers, which somehow looked capable.

"It must have been four o'clock when I had that bun and a cup of tea," she said.

She glanced at the table longingly: for she occasionally found it necessary to place a certain check upon a healthy appetite. She was, however, not singular in this respect, since the practice of such self-denial is, unfortunately, not a very unusual thing in the case of a good many young women in our cities who work remarkably hard. Then she resolutely shook her head.

"I must wait for Agatha," she said, and crossing the room towards the typewriter table stopped to glance at a little framed photograph that stood upon the mantel. It was a portrait of Gregory Hawtrey taken some years ago, and she apostrophied it with quiet scorn.

"Now you're wanted you're naturally away out yonder," she said. "You're like the rest of them – despicable!"

This seemed to relieve her feelings, and she sat down before the machine, which clicked and rattled for several minutes under her stubby fingers. Then the clicking ceased with sudden abruptness,

and she prodded the mechanism viciously with a hairpin. As this appeared unavailing she used her forefinger, and when at length the carriage slid along the rod with a clash there was a smear of grimy oil upon her cheek and her somewhat tilted nose. The machine, however, gave no further trouble, and she endeavoured to make up some, at least, of the time she had spent at the concert. It was necessary that it should be made up, but she was also conscious that she was putting off an evil moment.

At length the door opened, and Agatha Ismay, wrapped in a long cloak, came in. She permitted Winifred to take it from her, and then sank down into a chair. There was a strained look in her eyes, and her face was very weary.

"You're working late again?" she said.

Winifred nodded. "It's the men who loaf, my dear," she said. "When you undertake the transcription of an author's scrawl at ninepence the thousand words you have to work unusually hard, especially when, as it is in this case, the thing's practically unreadable. Besides, the woman in it makes me lose my temper. If I'd had a man of the kind described to deal with I'd have thrashed him."

She was throwing words about, partly to conceal her anxiety, and partly with the charitable purpose of giving her companion time to approach the subject that must be mentioned as she thought best; but she rather over-did it, and Agatha looked at her sharply.

"Winny," she said, "you know. You've been there."

Winifred turned towards her quietly, for she could face a crisis.

"Yes," she said, "I have, but you're not going to talk about it until you have had supper. Don't move until I make the coffee."

She was genuinely hungry, but while she satisfied her own appetite she took care that her companion, who did not seem inclined to eat, made a simple meal. Then she bundled the plates into a cupboard, and sat down facing her.

"Well," she said, "you have broken down exactly as that throat specialist said you would. The first question is, How long it will be before you can go on again?"

Agatha laughed, a little harsh laugh. "I didn't tell you everything at the time: I've broken down for good."

There was a moment or two's tense silence after that, and then Agatha made a dejected gesture. "He warned me that this might happen if I went on singing, but what could I do? I couldn't cancel my engagements without telling people why. He said I must go to Norway and give my throat and chest a rest."

They looked at one another, and there was in their eyes the half-bitter, half-weary smile of those to whom the cure prescribed is ludicrously impossible. It was Winifred who spoke first.

"Then," she said, "we have to face the situation, and it's not an encouraging one. Our joint earnings just keep us here in decency – we won't say comfort – and they're evidently to be subject to a big reduction. It strikes me as a rather curious coincidence that a letter from that man in Canada and one from your prosperous friends in the country arrived just before you went out."

She saw the look in Agatha's eyes, and spread her hands out.

"Yes," she admitted; "I hid them. It seemed to me that you had quite enough upon your mind this evening. I don't know if they're likely to throw any fresh light upon the question what we're going to do."

She produced the letters from a drawer in her table, and Agatha straightened herself suddenly in her chair when she had opened the first of them.

"Oh," she cried, "he wants me to go out to him!"

Winifred's face set hard for a moment, but it relaxed again, and she contrived to hide her dismay.

"Then," she suggested with a trace of dryness, "I suppose you'll certainly go. After all, he's probably not worse to live with than most of them."

Miss Rawlinson was occasionally a little bitter, but she had, like others of her kind, been compelled to compete in an overcrowded market with hard-driven men. She was, however, sincerely attached to her friend, and she smiled when she saw the flash in Agatha's eyes.

"Oh," she added, "you needn't try to wither me with your indignation. No doubt he's precisely what he ought to be, and I dare say it will ease your feelings if you talk about him again; at least, it will help you to formulate your reasons for going out to him. I'll listen patiently, and try not to be uncharitable."

Agatha fell in with the suggestion. It was a relief to talk, and she had also a certain respect, which she would not always admit, for her companion's shrewdness. She meant to go, but she desired to ascertain how a less interested person would regard the course she had decided on.

"I have known Gregory since I was a girl," she said.

Winifred pursed her lips up. "I understood you met him at the Grange, and you were only there for a few weeks once a year. After all, that isn't a very great deal. It seems he fell in love with you, which is, perhaps, comprehensible. What I don't quite know the reason for is why you fell in love with him."

"Ah," said Agatha, "you have never seen Gregory."

"I haven't," said Winifred sourly; "I have, however, seen his picture, and one must admit that he's reasonably good-looking. In fact, I've seen quite an assortment of them, but it's, perhaps, significant that the last was taken some years ago."

Agatha smiled. "Can a photograph show the clean, sanguine temperament of a man, his impulsive generosity, and cheerful optimism?"

Miss Rawlinson rose, and critically surveyed the photograph on the mantel. "I don't want to be discouraging, but after studying that one I'm compelled to admit that it can't. No doubt it's the artist's fault, but I'm willing to admit that a young girl would be rather apt to credit a man with a face like that with qualities he didn't possess." Then she sat down again with a thoughtful expression. "The fact is, you set him up on a pedestal and burned incense to him when you were not old enough to know any better, and when he came home for a few weeks four years ago you promised to marry him. Now it seems he's ready at last, and wants you to go out. Perhaps it doesn't affect the question, but if I'd promised to marry a man in Canada he'd certainly have to come for me. Isn't there a certain risk in the thing?"

"A risk?"

Winifred nodded. "Yes," she said, "rather a serious one. Four years is a long time, and the man may have changed. In a new country where everything's different it must be a thing they're rather apt to do."

A faint, half-compassionate, half-tolerant smile crept into Agatha's eyes. The mere idea that the sunny-tempered, brilliant young man whom she had given her heart to could have changed or degenerated in any way seemed absurd to her. Winifred, however, went on again.

"There's another point," she said. "If he's still the same, which isn't likely, there has certainly been a change in you. You have learned to see things more clearly, and acquired a different standard from the one you had then. One can't help growing, and as one grows one looks for more. One is no longer pleased with the same things; it's inevitable."

She broke off for a moment, and her voice grew gentler.

"Well," she added, "I've done my duty in trying to point this out to you, and now there's only another thing to say: since you're clearly bent on going, I'm going out with you."

Agatha looked astonished, but there was a suggestion of relief in her expression, for the two had been firm friends and had faced a good deal together.

"Oh," she said, "that gets over the one difficulty."

Winifred made a little whimsical gesture. "I'm not quite sure that it does. The difficulty will probably begin when I arrive in Canada, but I'm a rather capable person, and I believe they don't pay

one ninepence a thousand words in Winnipeg. Besides, I could keep the books at a store or hotel, and at the very worst Gregory could, perhaps, find a husband for me. Women, one understands, are after all held in some estimation in that country. Perhaps there's a man out there who would treat even a little, plain, vixenish-tempered person with a turned-up nose decently."

Crossing the room again she banged the cover down on the typewriter, and then turned to Agatha with a wide gesture and a suggestion of haziness in her eyes.

"Anyway, I'm very tired of this one. It would all be intolerable when you went away."

Agatha stretched out a hand and drew her down beside her. She, at least, no longer feared adverse fortune and loneliness, and she was filled with a gentle compassion, for she knew how hard a fight this girl had made, and part at least of what she had borne.

"My dear," she said, "we will go together."

Then she opened the second letter, which she had forgotten in the meanwhile.

"They want me to stay at the Grange for a few weeks," she said, and smiled. "An hour ago I felt crushed and beaten – and now, though my voice has probably gone for good, I don't seem to mind. Isn't it almost bewilderingly curious that both these letters should have come to sweep my troubles away to-night?"

"No," said her companion; "it's distinctly natural – just what one would have expected. You wrote the man in Canada soon after you'd seen the specialist, and his answer was bound to arrive in the next few days."

"But I certainly didn't write the folks at the Grange."

Winifred's eyes twinkled. "As it happens, I did, two days ago. I ventured to point out their duty to them, and they were rather nice about it in another letter."

Agatha stretched herself out in the low chair with a little sigh of content. "Well," she said, "it probably wouldn't have the least effect if I scolded you. I believe I'm horribly worn out, Winny, and it will be a relief unspeakable to get away. If I can arrange to give up those pupils I'll go to-morrow."

Winifred made no answer, and kneeling with one elbow resting on the arm of her companion's chair gazed straight in front of her. They were both of them very weary of the long grim struggle, and now a change was close at hand.

CHAPTER V.
THE OLD COUNTRY

It was a still, clear evening of spring when Wyllard, unstrapping the ruchsack from his shoulders, sat down beside a frothing stream in a dale of Northern England. On arriving in London a week or two earlier he had found a letter from Mrs. Hastings, who was then in Paris, awaiting him, in which she stated that she could not at the moment say when she would go home again, but that she expected to advise him shortly. After answering it he started North, and, obtaining Agatha's address from Miss Rawlinson, went on again to a certain little town which stands encircled by towering fells beside a lake in the North Country.

He had, however, already recognised that his mission was rather a delicate one, and he decided that it would be advisable to wait until he heard from Mrs. Hastings before calling upon Miss Ismay. There then remained the question, what to do with the next few days. A conversation with some pedestrian tourists whom he met at his hotel, and a glance at a map of the hill-tracks decided him, and remembering that he had on several occasions kept the trail in Canada for close on forty miles on end, he bought a Swiss pattern ruchsack, and set out on foot through the fells.

Incidentally, he saw such scenery as gave him a new conception of the Old Country, and nearly broke the hearts of his new friends the tourists, who volunteered to show him the way over what they evidently considered to be a rather difficult pass. To their great astonishment the brown-faced stranger, who wore ordinary tight-fitting American attire and rather pointed American shoes, went up it apparently without an effort, and for the credit of the clubs they belonged to, it seemed incumbent on them to keep pace with him. They naturally did not know that he had carried bags of flour and mining tools over very much higher passes close up to the limit of eternal snow, but after two days' climbing they were, on the whole, relieved to part company with him.

A professional guide who overtook them, however, recognised the capabilities of the man when he noticed the way he lifted his feet and how he set them down. This, he decided, was one accustomed to walking among the heather, but he was wrong; for it was the trick the bushman learns when he plods through leagues of undergrowth and fallen branches, or the tall grass of the swamps; and it is a memorable experience to make a day's journey with such a man. For the first hour the thing seems easy, for the pace is never forced, but it also never slackens down; and as the hours go by the novice, who flounders and stumbles, grows horribly weary of trying to keep up with that steady, persistent swing.

Wyllard had travelled since morning along a ridge of fells when he sat down beside the water and contentedly filled his pipe. On the one hand, a wall of crags high above was growing black against the evening light, and the stream came boiling down clear as crystal among great boulder stones; but he had wandered through many a grander and more savage scene of rocky desolation, and it impressed him less than the green valley in front of him. He had, at least, never seen anything like that either on the Pacific slope or in Western Canada.

Early as it was in the season, the meadows between rock and water were green as emerald, and the hedge-rows, just flushed with verdure, were clipped and trimmed as though their owner loved them. There was not a dead tree in the larch copse which dipped to the stream, and all its feathery tassels were sprinkled with tiny flecks of crimson and wondrous green. Great oaks dotted the meadows, each one perfect in symmetry. It seemed that the men who held this land cared for single trees. The sleek, tame cattle that rubbed their necks on the level hedge-top and gazed at him ruminatively were very different from the wild, long-horned creatures whose furious stampede he had now and then headed off, riding hard while the roar of hoofs rang through the dust-cloud that

floated like a sea fog across the sun-scorched prairie. Here, it seemed, all went smoothly; the whole vale was steeped in peace and tranquillity.

Then he noticed the pale primroses that pushed their yellow flowers up among the withered leaves, and the faint blue sheen beneath the beech trunks not far away. There was a vein of artistic daintiness in this man, and the elusive beauty of these things curiously appealed to him. He had seen the riotous, sensuous blaze of flowers kissed by Pacific breezes, and the burnished gold of wheat that rolled in mile-long waves; but it seemed to him that the wild things of the English North were, after all, more wonderful. They matched its deep peacefulness; their beauty was chaste, fairy-like, and ethereal.

By and bye a wood pigeon cooed softly somewhere in the shadows, and a brown thrush perched on a bare oak bough began to sing. The broken, repeated melody went curiously well with the rippling murmur of sliding water, and Wyllard leaned back with a smile to listen, though he could not remember ever having done anything of that kind before. His life had been a strenuous one, spent for the most part in the driving-seat of great ploughs that rent their ample furrows through virgin prairie, guiding the clinking binders through the wheat under a blazing sun, or driving the plunging dories through the clammy fog over short, slopping seas. Now, however, the tranquillity of the English valley stole in on him, and he began to understand how the love of that well-trimmed land clung to the men out West, who spoke of it tenderly as the Old Country.

Then, for he was in an unusually susceptible mood, he took a little deerhide case, artistically made by a Blackfoot Indian, from his pocket, and extracted from it the somewhat faded photograph of an English girl. He had got it from the lad he had buried among the ranges of the Pacific slope, and it had been his companion in many a desolate camp and on many a weary journey. The face was delicately modelled, and there was a freshness in it which is, perhaps, seldom seen outside the Old Country; but what pleased him more was the serenity in the clear, innocent eyes.

He was not in love with the picture – he would probably have smiled at the notion – but he had a curious feeling that he would meet the girl some day, and that it would then be a privilege only to speak to her. This was, after all, not so extravagant a fancy as it might appear, for romance, the mother of chivalry and many graces, still finds shelter in the hearts of such men as him from the wide spaces of the newer lands. Shrewd as they are, and practical, they see visions now and then, and, what is more, prove them to be realities with bleeding hands and toil incredible.

By and bye he put the photograph back in his pocket, and filled his pipe again, while it was almost dark before he had smoked it out. The thrush had gone, and only the ripple of the water broke the silence, until he heard footsteps on the stones behind him. Then, looking round, he saw a young woman moving towards the river, and he watched her with a quiet interest, for his perceptions were a little sharper than usual then, and it seemed to him that she was very much in harmony with what he thought of as the key-tone of the place. She was tall and shapely, and she moved with a quiet grace. When she stopped a moment, poised upon a shelf of rock as though considering the easiest way to the water, her figure fell into reposeful lines, but that was after all only what he had expected, for he now remembered that he had half-consciously studied the Englishwomen he had met in the West.

The Western women usually moved, and certainly spoke, with an almost superfluous vivacity and alertness. There was in them a feverish activity, which contrasted with the English deliberation. The latter had sometimes exasperated him, but it was becoming comprehensible, and taking on a more favourable aspect now. It was, he felt, born of the tranquillity of this well-trimmed land, a steadfastness that progressed slowly by system and rule, and he recognised that it would have troubled his sense of fitness if this girl had clattered down across the stones hurriedly and noisily.

As yet he could not see her face, but when she went on a little further it became evident that she desired to cross the river, and was regarding the row of stepping stones that stretched across it somewhat dubiously. One or two had apparently fallen over, or been washed away by a flood, for

there were several rather wide gaps between them, through which the stream frothed whitely. As soon as Wyllard noticed that, he rose and moved towards her.

"You want to get across?" he said.

She was still glancing at the water, but although he did not think she had seen him or heard his approach, she turned towards him quietly. Then a momentary sense of astonishment held him almost embarrassed, for it was her picture he had gazed at scarcely half an hour ago, and he would have recognised her anywhere.

"Yes," she said. "It is rather a long way round by the bridge, but some of the stones seem to have disappeared since I last came this way."

She spoke, as Wyllard had expected, softly and quietly, but he was first of all a man of action, and, somewhat to her astonishment, he forthwith waded into the river. Then he turned and held out his hand to her.

"It isn't a very long step. You ought to manage it," he said.

The girl favoured him with a swift glance of scrutiny. At first she had supposed him to be one of the walking tourists or climbers who invaded those valleys at Easter; but they were, for the most part, young men from the cities, and this stranger's face was darkened by the sun. There was also an indefinite suggestion of strength in the pose of his lean, symmetrical figure, which, though she did not recognise that fact, could only have come from strenuous labour in the open air. She, however, noticed that while the average Englishman would have asked permission to help her, or have deprecated the offer, this stranger did nothing of the kind. He stood with the water frothing about his ankles, holding out his hand.

She had no hesitation about taking it, and while he waded through the river she stepped lightly from stone to stone until she came to a rather wider gap, where the stream was deeper. Then she stopped a moment, gazing at the sliding froth, until the man's grasp tightened on her fingers, and she felt his other hand rest upon her waist.

"Now," he said, "I won't let you fall."

She was across the gap in another moment, wondering somewhat uneasily why she had obeyed the compelling pressure, but glad to see that his face was perfectly unmoved, and that he was evidently quite unconscious of having done anything unusual. She crossed without mishap, and when they stood on the shingle he dropped her hand.

"Thank you," she said. "I'm afraid you got rather wet."

The man laughed, and he had a pleasant laugh. "Oh," he said, "I'm used to it. Isn't there a village with a hotel in it, a mile or two from here?"

"Yes," said the girl, "this is the way. The path goes up to the high road through the larch wood."

She turned into it, and, though she had not expected this, the man walked beside her. Still, she did not resent it. His manner was deferential, and she liked his face, while there was, after all, no reason why he should stay behind when he was going the same way. He accompanied her silently for several minutes as they went on through the gloom of the larches, where a sweet, resinous odour crept into the still, evening air, and then he looked up as they came to a towering pine.

"Have you got many of those trees over here?" he asked.

Then a light dawned upon the girl, for, though he had spoken without perceptible accent, she had been slightly puzzled by something in his speech and appearance.

"I believe they're not uncommon. You are an American?" she said.

Wyllard laughed. "No," he said. "I was born in Western Canada, but I think I'm as English as you are, in some respects, though I never quite realised it until to-night. It isn't exactly because my father came from this country, either."

The girl was a trifle astonished at this answer, and still more at the indefinite something in his manner which seemed to indicate that he expected her to understand, as, indeed, she did. Her only dowry had been an expensive education, and she remembered that the influence of the isle she lived in

had in turn fastened on Saxons, Norsemen, Normans, and made them Englishmen. What was more, so far as she had read, those who had gone out South or Westwards had carried that influence with them and, under all their surface changes, and sometimes their grievances against the Motherland, were, in the great essentials, wholly English still.

"But," she said at random, "how can you be sure that I'm English?"

It was quite dark in among the trees, but she fancied there was a smile in her companion's eyes.

"Oh," he answered simply, "you couldn't be anything else!"

She accepted this as a compliment, though she fancied that it had not been his direct intention to pay her one. His general attitude since she had met him scarcely suggested such a lack of sense. She was becoming mildly interested in this stranger, but she possessed several essentially English characteristics, and it did not appear advisable to encourage him too much. She said nothing further, and it was he who spoke first.

"I wonder," he said, "if you knew a young lad who went out to Canada some few years ago. His name was Pattinson – Henry Pattinson."

"No," said his companion, "I certainly did not. Besides, the name is not an uncommon one. There are a good many Pattinsons in the North."

Wyllard was not astonished at this answer. He had reasons for believing that the name the lad he had befriended had enrolled himself under was not his correct one. It would, of course, have been easy to describe him, but Wyllard was shrewd, and noticing that there was now a restraint in his companion's manner he was not prepared to do that yet. He was aware that most of the English are characterised by a certain reserve, and apt to retire into their shells if pressed too hard. He did not, however, mean to let this girl elude him altogether.

"It really doesn't matter," he said, "I shall no doubt get upon his trail in due time."

They reached the high road a minute or two later, and the girl turned to him.

"Thank you again," she said. "If you go straight on you will come to the village in about a quarter of an hour."

Then she turned away and left him standing with his soft hat in his hand, and, as it happened, he stood quite still for almost a minute after she had gone. In due time, however, he reached the inn he had inquired about, and its old-world simplicity delighted him. It was built, feet thick, of slate stone, against the foot of the fell, and roofed, as he noticed, with ponderous flags. In Canada, where the frost was Arctic, they used thin cedar shingles. The room his meal was brought him in was panelled with oak that had turned black with age. Great rough-hewn beams of four times the size that anybody would have used for the purpose in the West supported the low ceiling, and – for there was a fire on the wide hearth – the ruddy gleam of burnished copper utensils pierced the shadows. The room was large, and there was only a single candle upon the table, but he felt that a garish light would somehow be out of harmony with the atmosphere of that interior.

By and bye his hostess appeared to clear the things away, and she was a little, withered old woman, immaculately neat, with shrewd, kindly eyes, and a russet tinge in her cheeks.

"There's a good light, and company in the sitting-room," she said. "We've three young men staying with us. They've been up the Pike."

"I'd sooner stay here, if I may," said Wyllard. "I don't quite know yet if I'll go on to-morrow. One can get through to Langley Dale by the Hause, as I think you call it?"

The wrinkled dame said that pedestrians often went that way, and Wyllard asked a question casually.

"There are some prosperous folks – people of station living round here?

"There's the vicar. I don't know that he's what you'd call prosperous. Then there's Mr. Martindale, of Rushyholme, and Little, of the Ghyll."

"Has any of them a daughter of about twenty-four years of age?" and Wyllard described the girl he had met to the best of his ability.

It was evident that the landlady did not recognise the description, but she seemed to consider.

"No," she said, "there's nobody like that; but I did hear that they'd a young lady staying at the vicarage."

Then she changed the subject abruptly, and Wyllard once more decided that the English did not like questions.

"You're a stranger, sir?" she said.

"I am," said Wyllard. "I've some business to attend to further on, but I came along on foot, to see the fells, and I'm glad I did. It's a great and wonderful country you're living in. That is," he added gravely, "when you get outside the towns. There are things in some of them that most make one ill."

Then he stood up. "That tray's too heavy for you. Won't you let me carry it?"

The landlady seemed astonished, but she made it clear that she desired no assistance, and when she went out Wyllard, who sat down again, took out the photograph. He gazed at it steadfastly, and then put it back into his pocket.

"There's rather more than mere prettiness there, but I don't know that I want to keep it now," he said. "It's way behind the original. She has grown in the meanwhile – just as one would expect that girl to grow."

Then he lighted his pipe, and smoked thoughtfully until he appeared to arrive at a decision.

"One can't force the running in this country. They don't like it," he said. "I'll lie by a day or two, and keep an eye on that vicarage."

In the meanwhile his hostess was discussing him with a niece.

"I'm sure I don't know what that man is," she informed the younger woman. "He has got the manners of a gentleman, but he walks like a fell shepherd, and his hands are like a navvy's. A man's hands now and then tell you a good deal about him. Besides, of all things, he wanted to carry his tray away. Said it was too heavy for me."

"Oh," said her niece, "he's an American. There's no accounting for them."

CHAPTER VI.
HER PICTURE

Wyllard stayed at the inn three days without seeing anything more of the girl he had met beside the stream, though he diligently watched for her. For one thing, he had long felt it was his duty to communicate with the relatives of the lad he had befriended, and the fact that he had found her photograph in the young Englishman's possession made it appear highly probable that she could assist him in tracing them. Apart from this, he could not quite analyse his motives for desiring to see more of her, though he was conscious of the desire. Her picture had, however, been a companion to him in his wanderings, and he had, indeed, now and then found a certain solace in gazing at it, while now he had seen her in the flesh he was willing to admit that he had never met any woman who had made the same impression on him. What he meant by that he was not quite certain; but it was in the meanwhile as far as he would go.

It was, of course, open to him to call at the vicarage, but though he meant to adopt that course as a last resort, there were certain objections to it. He did not even know the girl's name, and there was nobody to say a word for him; while, so far as his experience went, the English were rather apt to be reticent and reserved to an unknown stranger. It seemed to him that, although she might give him the information he required, their acquaintance would probably terminate then and there, which was not what he desired. She would, he decided, be less likely to stand upon her guard if he could contrive to meet her casually without pre-arrangement.

On the fourth day fortune favoured him, for he came upon her endeavouring to open a tottering gate where a stony hill track led off from the smooth white road. As it happened, he had received a letter from Mrs. Hastings that morning, fixing the date of her departure, which rendered it necessary for him to discharge the duty Hawtrey had saddled him with as soon as possible. The Grange, where he understood Miss Ismay was then staying, lay thirty miles away across the fells, and he had already decided to start early on the morrow. That being the case, it was clear that he must make the most of this opportunity; but he also realised that it would be advisable to proceed circumspectly. Saying nothing, he set his shoulder to the gate, and lifting it on its decrepit hinges swung it open.

"Thank you," said the girl, and then, remembering that this was the last thing she had said to him, she smiled, as she added, "It is the second time you have turned up when I was in difficulties."

In spite of his resolution to proceed cautiously, a twinkle crept into Wyllard's eyes, and suggested that the fact she had mentioned was not so much of a coincidence as it probably appeared. She saw it, and was about to pass on, when he stopped her with a gesture. He was, after all, usually a candid person.

"The fact is, I have been looking out for you the last three days," he said.

He fancied the girl had taken alarm at this, and spread his hands out deprecatingly. "Won't you hear me out?" he added. "There's a matter I must put before you, but I won't keep you long."

His companion was a little puzzled, and naturally curious. It struck her as somewhat strange that his rather startling admission should have roused in her very little indignation; but she felt that it would be unreasonable to suspect this man of anything that savoured of impertinence. His manner was reassuring, and she liked his face.

"Well?" she said inquiringly.

The man indicated a big oak trunk that lay just inside the gate.

"If you'll sit down, I'll get through as quick as I can," he said. "In the first place, I am, as I told you, a Canadian, come over partly to see the country, and partly to carry out one or two duties. In regard to one of them, I believe you can help me."

His companion's face was expressive of a very natural astonishment.

"I could help you?"

Wyllard nodded. "I'll explain my reasons for believing it later on," he said. "In the meanwhile, I asked you a question the other night, which I'll now try to make more explicit. Were you ever acquainted with a young Englishman who went to Canada from this country several years ago? He would be about twenty then, and had dark hair and eyes. That, of course, isn't an unusual thing, but there was a rather curious white mark on his left temple. If he was ever a friend of yours, that scar ought to fix it."

"Oh!" said the girl, "that must have been Lance Radcliffe. I was with him when the scar was made – ever so long ago. But you said his name was Pattinson – and we heard that he was dead."

"I did," said Wyllard gravely. "Still, I wasn't quite sure of it, and he's certainly dead. I buried him."

His companion made a little abrupt movement, and he saw the sudden softening of her eyes. There was, however, only a gentle pity in them, and nothing in her manner suggested the deeper feeling he had half-expected. That was also a relief to him.

"Then," she said, "I am sure that his father would like to meet you. There was some trouble between them – I don't know which was wrong – and Lance went out to Canada, and never wrote. By and bye, Major Radcliffe tried to trace him through a Vancouver banker, and only found that he had died in the hands of a stranger who had done all that was possible for him." She turned to Wyllard with a look which set his heart beating rather faster than usual. "You are that man?"

"Yes," said Wyllard simply, "I did what I could for him. It didn't amount to very much. He was too far gone."

Then at her request he told her the story he had told to Hawtrey, and when he had finished her face was soft again, for it had stirred her curiously.

"But," she said, "he had no claim on you."

Wyllard lifted one hand as if in expostulation. "He was dying in the bush. Wasn't that enough?"

The girl made no answer for a moment or two. She had earned her living for several years, and was, because of it, to some extent acquainted with the grim realities of life. She did not know that while there are certainly hard men in Canada, the small farmers and ranchers of the West – and, perhaps above all, the fearless free lances who build railroads and grapple with giant trees in the forests of the Pacific slope – are, as a rule, distinguished by a splendid charity. With them the sick or worn-out stranger is very seldom turned away. Still, watching her companion covertly, she understood that this man whom she had seen for the first time three days ago had done exactly what she would have expected of him. Then she proceeded to give him the information she supposed he desired.

"I saw a good deal of Lance Radcliffe – when I was younger," she said. "His people still live at Garside Scar, close by Dufton Holme. I presume you will call on them?"

Wyllard said that he proposed doing so as he had a watch and one or two other mementoes that they might like to have, and when she told him how to reach Dufton Holme by a very round-about railway journey he supposed it lay somewhere in the dale to which he already purposed going. Then she turned to him again.

"There is one point that rather puzzles me," she said. "How did you know that I could tell you anything about him?"

The man thrust his hand into his pocket, and took out a little leather case.

"You are by no means a stranger to me," he said, and quietly handed her the photograph. "This is your picture; I found it among the dead lad's things."

The girl, who started visibly, flashed a very keen glance at him. There was, however, no doubt that he had not intended to produce any dramatic effect. Then she flushed a little.

"I never knew he had it," she said. "Perhaps he got it from his sister." She paused, and then, as though impelled to make the fact quite clear, added, "I certainly never gave it him."

Wyllard smiled gravely, for he recognised that while she was clearly grieved to hear of his death, she could have had no particular tenderness for the unfortunate lad. He was, however, a little off his guard just then.

"Well," he said, "perhaps he took it in the first place for the mere beauty of it, and it afterwards became a companion – something that connected him with the Old Country. It appealed in one of those ways to me."

Again she flashed a sharp glance at him, but he went on unheeding:

"When I found it I meant to keep it merely as a clue, and so that it could be given up to his relatives some day," he added. "Then I fell into the habit of looking at it in my lonely camp in the bush at night, and when I sat beside the stove while the snow lay deep upon the prairie. There was something in your eyes that seemed to encourage me."

"To encourage you?"

"Yes," Wyllard assented gravely; "I think that expresses it. When I camped in the bush of the Pacific slope we were either out on the gold trail – and we generally came back ragged and unsuccessful after spending several months' wages which we could badly spare – or I was going from one wooden town to another without a dollar in my pocket and wondering, how I was to obtain one when I got there. For a time it wasn't much more cheerful on the prairie: twice in succession the harvest failed. Perhaps Lance Radcliffe felt as I did."

The girl cut him short. "Why didn't you mention the photograph at once?"

Wyllard smiled at her. "Oh," he said, "I didn't want to be precipitate – your folks don't seem to like that; I've met them out West. I think" – and he seemed to consider – "I wanted to make sure you wouldn't be repelled by what might look like Colonial *brusquerie*. You see, you have been over snow-barred divides and through great shadowy forests with me. We've camped among the boulders by lonely lakes, and gone down frothing rapids. I felt – I can't tell you why – that I was bound to meet you some day."

It was, perhaps, a trifle startling, but the girl now showed neither astonishment nor resentment. She felt curiously certain that this stranger was not posing or speaking for effect. It did not occur to him that he might have gone too far, and for a space he leaned against the gate, saying nothing, while she looked at him with what he thought of as her gracious English calm.

Pale sunshine fell upon them, though the larches beside the road were rustling beneath a little cold wind, and the song of the river came up brokenly out of the valley. An odour of fresh grass floated about them, and the dry, cold smell of the English spring was in the air. Across the valley dim ghosts of hills lighted by evanescent gleams rose out of the east wind greyness with shadowy grandeur.

Then Wyllard seemed to rouse himself. "I wonder if I ought to write Major Radcliffe and tell him what my object is before I call?" he said. "It would make the thing a little easier."

The girl rose. "Yes," she assented, "that would, perhaps, be wiser." Then she glanced at the photograph which was still in her hand. "It has served its purpose. I scarcely think it would be of any great interest to Major Radcliffe."

She saw his face change as she made it evident that she did not mean to give the portrait back to him; but there was, at least, one excellent reason why she would not have her picture in a strange man's hands.

"Thank you," she said, "for the story. I am glad we have met; but I'm afraid I have already kept my friends waiting for me."

Then she turned away, and it occurred to Wyllard that he had made a very indifferent use of the opportunity, since she had neither asked his name nor told him hers. It was, however, evident that he could not well run after her and demand it, and he decided that he could in all probability obtain it from Major Radcliffe when he called upon him. Still, he regretted his lack of adroitness as he walked back to the inn, where he wrote two letters when he had consulted a map and his landlady. Dufton Holme, he discovered, was a small village within a mile or two of the Grange where, as Miss

Rawlinson had informed him, Agatha Ismay was then staying. One letter was addressed to her, and he formally asked permission to call upon her with a message from Gregory Hawtrey. The other was to Major Radcliffe, and in both he said that an answer would reach him at the inn which his landlady had informed him was to be found not far from either of the houses he proposed to visit.

He set out on foot next morning, and after climbing a steep pass followed a winding track across a waste of empty moor until he struck a smooth white road, which led past a rock-girt lake and into a deep valley. It was six o'clock when he started, and three when he reached the inn, where he found an answer to one of his letters awaiting him. It was from Major Radcliffe, who desired an interview with him as soon as possible.

Within an hour he was on his way to the Major's house, where a grey-haired man, whose yellow skin suggested long exposure to a tropical sun, and a little withered lady were waiting for him. They received him graciously, but there was an indefinite something in their manner and bearing which Wyllard, who had read a good deal, recognised, though he had never been brought into actual contact with it until then. He felt that he could not have expected to come across such people anywhere but in England, unless it was at the headquarters of a British battalion in India.

He told his story tersely, softening unpleasant details, and making little of what he had done, and the grey-haired man listened gravely with an unmoved face, though a trace of moisture crept into the little lady's eyes. There was silence for a moment or two when he had finished, and then Major Radcliffe, whose manner was very quiet, turned to him.

"You have laid me under an obligation which I could never wipe out, even if I wished it," he said. "It was my only son you buried out there in Canada."

He broke off for a moment, and his quietness was more marked than ever when he went on again.

"As you have no doubt surmised, we quarrelled," he said. "He was extravagant and careless – at least I thought that then – but now it seems to me that I was unduly hard on him. His mother" – and he turned to the little lady with an inclination that pleased Wyllard curiously – "was sure of it at the time. In any case, I took the wrong way, and he went out to Canada. I made that, at least, easy for him – and I have been sorry ever since."

He paused again with a little expressive gesture. "It seems due to him, and you, that I should tell you this. When no word reached us I had inquiries made, through a banker he called upon, who, discovering that he had registered at a hotel as Pattinson, at length traced him to a British Columbian silver mine. He had, however, left it shortly before my correspondent learned that he had been employed there, and all the latter could tell me was that an unknown prospector had nursed him until he died."

Wyllard, who said nothing, took out a watch and the clasp of a workman's belt from his pocket, and laid them gently on Mrs. Radcliffe's knee. He saw her eyes fill, and turned his head away.

"I feel that you may blame me for not writing sooner, but it was only a very little while ago that I was able to trace you, and then it was only by a very curious – coincidence," he said presently.

This was the most apposite word that occurred to him, for he did not consider it advisable to mention the photograph. It seemed to him that the girl would not like it. Nor, though he was greatly tempted, did he care to make inquiries concerning her just then. In another moment or two the Major spoke again.

"If I can make your stay here pleasanter in any way I should be delighted," he said. "If you will take up your quarters with us I will send down to the inn for your things."

Wyllard excused himself, but when the lady urged him at least to dine with them on the following evening he appeared to consider.

"The one difficulty is that I don't know yet whether I shall be engaged then," he explained. "As it happens, I've a message for Miss Ismay, and I wrote offering to call upon her at any convenient hour. So far I have heard nothing from her."

"She's away," Mrs. Radcliffe informed him. "They have probably sent your letter on to her. I had a note from her yesterday, however, and expect her here to-morrow. You have met some friends of hers in Canada?"

"Gregory Hawtrey," said Wyllard. "I have promised to call upon his people, too."

He saw Major Radcliffe glance at his wife, and the faint gleam in the latter's eyes.

"Well," she said, "if you will promise to come I will send word over to Agatha."

Wyllard agreed to this, and went away a few minutes later. He noticed the tact and consideration with which his new friends had refrained from expressing any sign of the curiosity he fancied they naturally felt, for Mrs. Radcliffe's face had suggested that she understood the situation. The latter was, however, commencing to appear a little more difficult to him. It was, it seemed, his task to explain to a girl brought up among such people delicately what she must be prepared to face as a farmer's wife in Western Canada. He was not sure that this would be easy in itself, but it was rendered much more difficult by the fact that Hawtrey would expect him to accomplish it without unduly daunting her. Her letter had certainly suggested courage, but, after all, it was as he reflected the courage of ignorance, and he had now some notion of the life of ease and refinement her English friends led. He was commencing to feel sorry for Agatha Ismay.

CHAPTER VII.
AGATHA DOES NOT FLINCH

Next evening Wyllard sat with Mrs. Radcliffe in a big low-ceilinged room at Garside Scar, looking about him with quiet interest. He had now and then spent a day or two in huge Western hotels, but he had never seen anything quite like that room. The sheer physical comfort of its arrangements appealed to him, but after all he was not one who had ever studied his bodily ease very much, and what he regarded as the chaste refinement of its adornment had a deeper effect. Though he had lived for the most part in the bush and on the prairie, he had been endued with or had somehow acquired an artistic susceptibility.

The furniture was old, and perhaps a trifle shabby, but it was, as he noticed, of beautiful design. Curtains, carpets, tinted walls, formed, it seemed to him, a harmony of soft colouring, and there were scattered here and there dainty works of art, little statuettes from Italy, and wonderful Indian ivory and silver work. Then a row of low, stone-ribbed windows pierced the front of the room, and looking out he saw the trim garden lying in the warm evening light. Immediately beneath the windows ran a broad gravelled terrace, which was apparently raked smooth every day, with a row of urns in which hyacinths bloomed upon its pillared wall. From the middle of it a wide stairway led down to the wonderful velvet lawn, which was dotted with clumps of cupressus with golden gleams in it, and beyond that clipped yews rose smooth and solid as a rampart of stone.

It all impressed him curiously – the order and beauty of it, the signs of loving care. It gave him a key, he fancied, to the lives the cultured English led, for there was no sign of strain and fret and stress and hurry here. Everything, it seemed, went smoothly with rhythmic regularity, and though it is possible that a good many Englishmen would have regarded Garside Scar as a very second-rate country house, and seen in Major Radcliffe and his wife nothing more than a somewhat prosy old soldier and a withered lady, old-fashioned in her dress and views, this Westerner had what was, perhaps, a clearer vision. He could imagine the Major standing fast at any cost upon some minute point of honour, and it seemed to him that his lady might have stepped down from some old picture with all the graces of an earlier age and the smell of the English lavender upon her garments. Then he remembered that, after all, Englishwomen lived somewhat coarsely in the Georgian days, and that he had met hard-handed men grimed with dust and sweat who could also stand fast by a point of honour in Western Canada. Though the latter fact did not occur to him, he had, for that matter, done it more than once himself.

Then he recalled his wandering thoughts as his hostess smiled at him.

"You are interested in all you see?" she asked frankly.

"Yes, madam," said Wyllard – and the word rose instinctively to his lips, for it seemed to him the only fitting way to address her. "In fact, I'd like to spend some hours here and look at everything. I'd begin at the pictures and work right round."

His companion's smile suggested that she was not displeased.

"But you have been in London?"

"I have," said Wyllard. "I had one or two letters to folks there from big flour shippers, and they did all they could to entertain me. Still, their places were different; they hadn't the – charm – of yours. It's something which I think could only exist in these still valleys and in cathedral closes. It strikes me more because it is something I've never been accustomed to."

The lady was interested, and fancied that she partly understood his attitude.

"Your life is necessarily different from ours," she suggested.

Wyllard smiled. "It's so different that you couldn't realise it. It's all strain and effort from early sunrise until after dusk at night. Bodily strain of aching muscles, and mental stress in adverse seasons.

We scarcely think of comfort, and never dream of artistic luxury. The dollars we raise are sunk again in seed and extra teams and ploughs."

"After all, a good many people are driven rather hard by the love of money here."

"No," said Wyllard gravely, "that's not it exactly. At least, not with most of us. It's rather the pride of wresting another quarter-section from the prairie, taking – our own – by labour, breaking the wilderness. You" – and he added this as though to explain that he could hardly expect her to quite grasp his views – "have never been out West?"

His hostess laughed. "I have stayed down in the plains through the hot season in stifling cantonments, and I have once or twice been in Indian cholera camps. Besides, I have seen my husband sitting, haggard and worn with fever, in his saddle holding back a clamorous crowd that surged about him half-mad with religious fury. There were Hindus and Moslems to be kept from flying at each others' throats, and at a tactless word or sign of wavering either party would have pulled him down."

"You'll have to forgive me, madam" – and Wyllard's gesture was deprecatory, though his eyes twinkled. "The notion that we're the only ones who really work, or, at least, do anything worth while, is rather a favourite one out West. No doubt it's a delusion. I should have known that all of us are born like that."

His hostess forgave him readily, if only for the "all of us," which struck her as especially fortunate. A few minutes later there were voices in the hall, and then the door opened, and the girl he had met at the stepping stones came in. She was dressed differently, in trailing garments which, it seemed to him, became her wonderfully, and he noticed now the shapely delicacy of her hands and the fine, ivory pallor of her skin. Then his hostess turned to him.

"I had better present you formally to Miss Ismay," she said. "Agatha, this is Mr. Wyllard, who I understand has brought you a message from Canada."

There was no doubt that Wyllard was blankly astonished, and for a moment the girl was clearly startled, too.

"You!" was all she said.

She, however, held her hand out before she turned to speak to Mrs. Radcliffe, but it was a slight relief to both when somebody announced that dinner was ready.

Wyllard sat next to his hostess, and was not sorry that he was only called upon to take part in casual general conversation, though he fancied once or twice that Miss Ismay was unobtrusively studying him. It was also nearly an hour after the meal was over when Mrs. Radcliffe left them alone in her little drawing-room.

"You have, no doubt, a good deal to talk about, and you needn't join us until you're ready," she said. "The Major always reads the London papers after dinner."

Agatha sat down in a low chair near the hearth, and it first of all occurred to Wyllard, who took a place opposite her, that she was, although of full stature, too delicate and dainty, too over-cultivated, in fact, to marry Hawtrey. This was rather curious, since he had hitherto regarded his comrade as a typical, well-educated Englishman; but it now seemed to him that there was a certain streak of coarseness in Gregory. The man, it suddenly flashed upon him, was self-indulgent, and his careless ease of manner, which he had once liked, was rather too much in evidence. In a few moments, however, Agatha turned to him.

"I understand that Gregory is recovering rapidly?" she said.

Wyllard assured her that this was the case, and Agatha said quietly, "He wants me to go out to him."

Wyllard felt that if a girl of this kind had promised to marry him he would not have sent for her but have come in person, if he had been compelled to pledge his last possessions, or crawl to the tideway on his hands and knees. For all that, he was ready to defend his friend.

"I'm afraid it's necessary," he said. "Gregory was quite unfit for such a journey when I left, and he must be ready to commence the season's campaign with the first of the spring. Our summer is

short, you see, and with our one-crop farming it's indispensable to get the seed in early: in fact, he will be badly behind as it is."

This was not particularly tactful since, without intending it, he made it evident that he felt his comrade had been to some extent remiss; but Agatha smiled.

"Oh," she said, "I understand! You needn't labour the excuse. But doesn't the same thing apply to you?"

"It certainly did. Now, however, things have become a little easier. My holding's larger than Gregory's, and I have a foreman who can look after it for me."

"Gregory said that you were a great friend of his."

Wyllard seized this opportunity. "He is a great friend of mine, and I like to think it means the same thing. In fact, it's reasonably certain that he saved my life for me."

"Ah!" said Agatha; "that is a thing he didn't mention. How did it come about?"

Wyllard was glad to tell the story: he was anxious to say all he honestly could in Hawtrey's favour.

"We were at work on a railroad trestle – a towering wooden bridge, in British Columbia. It stretched across a deep ravine with great boulders and a stream in the bottom of it, and we stood high up on a staging close beneath the metals. A fast freight, a huge general produce train, came down the track, with one of the new big locomotives hauling it, and when the cars went banging by above us we could hardly hold on to the bridge. Still, the construction foreman was a hustler, and we had to get the spikes in. I was swinging the hammer when I felt the plank beneath me slip. The train, it seems, had jarred the bolt we had our lashings round loose. For a moment I felt that I was going down into the gorge, and then Gregory leaned out and grabbed me. He had only one free hand to do it with, and when he felt my weight one foot swung out from the stringer he had sprung to. It seemed certain that I would pull him with me, too. We hung like that for a space – I don't quite know how long."

He paused for a moment, apparently feeling the stress of it again, and there was a faint thrill in his voice when he went on.

"It was then," he said, "I knew just what kind of man Gregory Hawtrey was. Anybody else would have let me go; but he held on. Then I got my hand on some of the framing, and he swung me on to the stringer."

He saw the gleam in Agatha's eyes. "Oh!" she said, "that is just what he must have done. He was like that always – impulsive, splendidly generous."

Wyllard felt that he had succeeded, though he knew that there were men on the prairie who called his comrade slackly careless, instead of impulsive. Agatha, however, spoke again.

"But Gregory wasn't a carpenter," she said.

"In those days when dollars were scanty we had to be whatever we could. There wasn't much specialisation of handicrafts out there then. The farmer whose crop was ruined took up the railroad shovel, or borrowed a saw from somebody and set about building houses, or anything else that was wanted."

"Of course!" said Agatha. "Besides, he was always wonderfully quick. He could learn any game by just watching it awhile. He did all he undertook brilliantly."

It occurred to Wyllard that Gregory had, at least, made no great success of farming; but that occupation, as practised on the prairie, demands a good deal more than quickness and what some call brilliancy from the man who undertakes it. He must, as they say out there, possess the capacity for staying with it; the grim courage to hold fast the tighter under each crushing blow, when his teams die, or the grain shrivels under the harvest frost, or ragged ice hurtling before a roaring blast does the reaping. It was, however, evident that this girl had an unquestioning faith in Gregory Hawtrey, and once more Wyllard felt compassionate towards her. He wondered if she would have retained it had the man spent those four years in England instead of Canada: for it was clear from the contrast between

her and her picture that she had grown in many ways since she had given her promise to her lover. He had said what he could in Hawtrey's favour, but now he felt that something was due to the girl.

"Gregory told me to explain what things are like out there," he said. "I think it is because they are so different from what you are accustomed to that he has waited as long as he has done. He wanted to make them as easy as possible for you, and now he would like you to realise what is before you."

He was almost astonished at the girl's comprehension, for she glanced round the luxurious room with a faint smile.

"You look on me as part of – this? I mean it seems to you that I fit in with my surroundings, and would only be in harmony with them?"

"Yes," said Wyllard gravely, "I think you fit in with them excellently."

Agatha laughed. "Well," she said, "I was once, to a certain extent, accustomed to something similar; though, after all, one could hardly compare the Grange with Garside Scar. Still, that was some time ago, and I have earned my living for several years now. That counts for something, doesn't it?"

She glanced down at her dress. "For instance, this is the result of a good deal of self-denial, though the cost of it was partly worked off in music lessons, and the stuff was almost the cheapest I could get. I sang at concerts – and it was part of my stock-in-trade. After all, why should you think me only capable of living in luxury?"

"I didn't quite go that far."

She laughed again. "Then is Canada such a very dreadful place? I have heard of other Englishwomen going out there as farmers' wives. Do they all live unhappily?"

"No," said Wyllard; "at least, they show no sign of it, and some of them and the city-born Canadians are, I think, the salt of this earth. Probably it's easy to be calm and gracious in such a place as this – though I naturally don't know since I've never tried it – but when a woman who toils from sunrise to sunset most of the year keeps her sweetness and serenity, it's a very different and much finer thing. But I'll try to answer the other question. The prairie isn't dreadful; it's a land of sunshine and clear skies. Heat and cold – and we have them both – don't worry one there. There's optimism in the crystal air. It's not beautiful like these valleys, but it has its beauty. It's vast and silent, and, though our homesteads are crude and new, once you pass the breaking it's primevally old. That gets hold of one somehow. It's wonderful after sunset in the early spring, when the little cold wind's like wine, and it runs white to the horizon with the smoky red on the rim of it melting into transcendental green. When the wheat rolls across the foreground in ochre and burnished copper waves, it's more wonderful still. One sees the fulfilment of the promise, and takes courage."

"Then," said Agatha, who had scarcely suspected him of a capacity for such flights as this, "what is there to shrink from?"

"In the case of a small farmer's wife, the constant, never-slackening strain. There's no hired assistance; she must clean the house, and wash, and cook – though it's not unusual for the men to wash the plates."

The girl was evidently not much impressed, for she laughed.

"Does Gregory wash the plates?" she asked.

Wyllard's eyes twinkled. "When Sproatly won't," he said. "Still, in a general way they only do it once a week."

"Ah," said Agatha, "I can imagine Gregory hating it. As a matter of fact, I like him for it."

"Then she must bake, and mend her husband's clothes. Indeed, it's not unusual for her to mend for the hired man too. Besides that, there are always odds and ends of tasks, but the time when you feel the strain most is in the winter. Then you sit at night, shivering, as a rule, beside the stove in an almost empty log-walled room, reading a book you have probably read three or four times before. Outside, the frost is Arctic; you can hear the roofing shingles crackle now and then; and you wake up when the fire burns low. There's no life, no company, rarely a new face, and if you go to a dance or

supper somewhere, perhaps once a month, you ride back on a bob-sled frozen almost stiff beneath the robes."

"Still," said Agatha, "that does not last."

The man understood her. "Oh!" he said, "one makes progress – that is, if one can stand the strain – but, as the one way of doing it is to sow for a larger harvest and break fresh sod every year, there can be no slackening down in the meanwhile. Every dollar must be guarded and ploughed into the soil again."

He broke off, feeling that he had done all that could reasonably be expected of him, and Agatha asked one question.

"A woman who didn't slacken could make the struggle easier for the man?"

"Yes," said Wyllard simply, "in every way. Still, she would have a great deal to bear."

Agatha's face softened. "Ah," she said, "she would not grudge the effort in the case of one she loved."

Then she looked up again with a smile. "I wonder," she added, "if you really thought I should flinch."

"When I first heard of it, I thought it quite likely. Then when I read your letter my doubts vanished."

He saw he had not been judicious, for there was, for the first time, a trace of hardness in the girl's expression.

"He showed you that?" she asked.

"One small part of it," said Wyllard. "I want to say that when I saw this house, and how you seemed fitted to it, my misgivings about Gregory's decision troubled me once more. Now" – and he made a little impressive gesture – "they have vanished altogether, and they'll never come back again."

He spoke as he felt. This girl, he fancied, would feel the strain; but it seemed to him that she had strength enough to bear it cheerfully. In spite of her daintiness, she was one who, in time of stress, could be depended on. He often remembered afterwards how they had sat together in the little, luxuriously furnished room, she leaning back, with the soft light on her delicately tinted face, in her big, low chair. In the meanwhile she said nothing, and by and bye he looked up at her.

"It's curious that I had your photograph ever so long, and never thought of showing it Gregory," he said.

Agatha smiled. "I suppose it is," she admitted. "After all, except that it might have been a relief to Major Radcliffe if he had met you sooner, the fact that you didn't show it Gregory doesn't seem of any particular consequence."

Wyllard was not quite sure of this. He had thought about this girl often, and had certainly been conscious of a curious thrill of satisfaction when he had met her at the stepping-stones a few days earlier. That feeling had also suddenly disappeared when he had learned that she was his comrade's promised wife. He had, however, during the last hour or two made up his mind to think no more of her.

"Well," he said, "the next thing is to arrange for Mrs. Hastings to meet you in London, or, perhaps, at the Grange. Her husband is a Canadian, a man of education, who has quite a large homestead not far from Gregory's. Her folks are people of station in Montreal, and I feel sure that you'll like her."

They decided that he was to ask Mrs. Hastings to stay a few days at the Grange, and then he looked at the girl somewhat diffidently.

"She suggests going in a fortnight," he said.

Agatha smiled at him. "Then," she said, "I must not keep her waiting."

She rose, and they went back together to join their hostess.

CHAPTER VIII.
THE TRAVELLING COMPANION

A grey haze, thickened by the smoke of the city, drove out across the water when the *Scarrowmania* lay in the Mersey, with her cable hove short, and the last of the flood tide gurgling against her bows. A trumpeting blast of steam swept high aloft from beside her squat funnel, and the splash of the slowly turning paddles of the couple of steam tugs that lay alongside mingled with the din it made. A gangway from one of them led to the *Scarrowmania's* forward deck, and a stream of frowsy humanity that had just been released from overpacked emigrant boarding-houses poured up it. There were apparently representatives of all peoples and languages among that unkempt horde – Britons, Scandinavians, Teutons, Italians, Russians, Poles – and they moved on in forlorn apathy, like cattle driven to the slaughter. One wondered, from the look of them, how they had raised their passage money, and how many years' bitter self-denial it had cost them to provide for their transit to the land of promise.

At the head of the gangway stood the steamboat doctors, for the *Scarrowmania* was taking out an unusual number of passengers, and there were two of them. They were immaculate in blue uniform, and looked very clean and English by contrast with the mass of frowsy aliens. Beside them stood another official, presumably acting on behalf of the Dominion Government, though there were few restrictions imposed upon Canadian immigration then, nor for that matter did anybody trouble much about the comfort of the steerage passengers. Though they have altered all that latterly, each steamer, in a general way, carried as many as she could hold.

As the stream poured out of the gangway, the doctor glanced at each new comer's face, and then seizing him by the wrist uncovered it. Since this took him two or three seconds, one could have fancied that he either possessed peculiar powers, or that the test was a somewhat inefficient one. Then he looked at the official, who made a sign, and the man moved on.

In the meanwhile a group of first-class passengers leaning on the thwart-ship rails close by looked on, with complacent satisfaction with the fact that they were born in a different station, or half-contemptuous pity, as their temperament varied. Among them stood Mrs. Hastings, Miss Winifred Rawlinson, and Agatha. The latter noticed that Wyllard sat on a hatch forward near the head of the gangway, with a pipe in his hand. She drew Mrs. Hastings's attention to it.

"Whatever is Mr. Wyllard doing there?" she asked.

Her companion, who was wrapped in furs, for there was a sting in the east wind, smiled at her.

"That," she said, "is more than I can tell you; but Harry Wyllard seems to find an interest in what other folks would consider most unpromising things, and, what's more to the purpose, he's rather addicted to taking a hand in. It's a habit that costs him something now and then."

Agatha asked nothing further. She was interested in Wyllard, but she was at the moment more interested in the faces of those who swarmed on board. She wondered what they had endured in the lands that had cast them out, and what they might still have to bear. It seemed to her that the murmur of their harsh voices went up in a great protest, an inarticulate cry of sorrow. While she looked on the doctor held back a long-haired man who was following a haggard woman shuffling in broken boots. He drew him aside, and when, after he had apparently consulted with the other official, two seamen hustled the man towards a second gangway that led to the tug, the woman raised a wild, despairing cry. It, however, seemed that she blocked the passage, and a quartermaster drove her, expostulating in an agony of terror, forward among the rest. Nobody appeared concerned about this alien's tragedy, except one man, but Agatha was not astonished when Wyllard rose and quietly laid his hand upon the official's shoulder.

A parley appeared to follow, somebody gave an order, and when the alien was led back again the woman's cries subsided. Agatha looked at her companion, and once more a smile crept into Mrs. Hastings's eyes.

"Yes," she said, "I guessed he would feel he had to stand in. That's a man who can't see any one in trouble." Then she added, with a little whimsical sigh, "He had a bonanza harvest last fall, any way."

They moved aft soon afterwards, and the *Scarrowmania* was smoothly sliding seawards with the first of the ebb when Agatha met Wyllard. He glanced at the Lancashire sandhills, which were fading into a pale ochre gleam amidst the haze over the starboard hand, and then at the long row of painted buoys that moved back to them ahead.

"You're off at last! The sad grey weather is dropping fast astern," he said. "Out yonder, the skies are clear."

"Thank you," said Agatha, "I'm to apply that as I like? As a matter of fact, however, our days weren't always grey. But what was the trouble when those steerage people came on board?"

Wyllard's manner, as she noticed, was free alike from the complacent self-satisfaction which occasionally characterises the philanthropist, and any affectation of diffidence.

"Well," he said, "there was something wrong with that woman's husband. Nothing infectious, I believe, but they didn't seem to consider him a desirable citizen. They make a warning example of somebody with a physical infirmity now and then. The man, they decided, must be put ashore again. In the meanwhile, somebody else had hustled the woman forward, and it almost looked as if they'd have taken her on without him. The tug was almost ready to cast off."

"How dreadful!" said Agatha. "But what did you do?"

"Merely promised to guarantee the cost of his passage back if they'd refer his case to the immigration people at the other end. It's scarcely likely that they'll make trouble. As a rule, they only throw folks who're certain to become a charge on the community."

"But if he really had any infirmity, mightn't it lead to that?"

"No," said Wyllard drily. "I would engage to give him a fair start if it was necessary. You wouldn't have had that woman landed in Montreal, helpless and alone, while the man was sent back again to starve in Poland?"

He saw a curious liquid gleam in Agatha's eyes, and added in a deprecating manner, "You see, I've now and then limped without a dollar into a British Columbian mining town."

The girl was a little stirred; but there was another matter that must be mentioned, though she felt that the time was somewhat inopportune.

"Miss Rawlinson, who had only a second-class ticket, insists upon being told how it is that she has been transferred to the saloon."

Wyllard's eyes twinkled, but she noticed that he was wholly free from embarrassment, which was not quite the case with her.

"Well," he said, "that's a matter I must leave you to handle. Anyway, she can't go second-class now. One or two of the steerage exchanged when they saw their quarters, for which I don't blame them, and they've filled every room right up."

"You haven't answered the question."

Wyllard waved his hand. "Miss Rawlinson is your bridesmaid, and I'm Gregory's best man. It seems to me it's my business to do everything just as he'd like it done."

He left her a moment later, and, though she did not know how she was to explain the matter to Miss Rawlinson, who was of an independent disposition, it occurred to her that he, at least, had found a rather graceful way out of the difficulty. The more she saw of this Western farmer, the more she liked him.

It was after dinner when she next met him, and, for the wind had changed, the *Scarrowmania* was steaming head-on into a glorious north-west breeze. The shrouds sang; chain-guy, and stanchion, and whatever caught the wind, set up a deep-toned throbbing; and ranks of little, white-topped seas

rolled out of the night ahead. A half-moon hung low above them, blurred now and then by wisps of flying cloud, and odd spouts of spray that gleamed in the silvery light leapt up about the dipping bows. Wyllard was leaning on the rails, with a cigar in his hand, when she stopped beside him, and she glanced towards the lighted windows of the smoke-room not far away.

"How is it you are not in there?" she asked, for something to say.

"I was," said Wyllard. "It's rather full up, and it seemed they didn't want me. They're busy playing cards, and the stakes are rather high. In a general way, a steamboat's smoke-room is less of a men's lounge than a gambling club."

"And you object to cards?"

"Oh, no!" said Wyllard. "They merely make me tired, and when I feel I want some excitement for my dollars I get it another way. That one seems tame to me."

"Which is the one you like?"

The man laughed. "There are a good many that appeal to me. Once it was collecting sealskins off other people's beaches, and there was zest enough in that, in view of the probability of the dory turning over, or a gunboat dropping on to you. Then there was a good deal of very genuine excitement to be got out of placer-mining in British Columbia, especially when there was frost in the ranges, and you had to thaw out your giant-powder. Shallow alluvial workings have a way of caving in when you least expect it of them. After all, however, I think I like the prairie farming best."

"Is that exciting?"

"Yes," said Wyllard, "if you do it in one way. The gold's there – that you're sure of – piled up by nature during I don't know how many thousand years, but you have to stake high if you want to get much of it out. One needs costly labour, teams – no end of them – breakers, and big gang-plough. The farmer who has nerve enough drills his last dollar into the soil in spring, but if he means to succeed it costs him more than that. He must give the sweat of his tensest effort, the uttermost toil of his body – all, in fact, that has been given him. Then he must shut his eyes tight to the hazards against him, or, and we can't all do that, look at them without wavering – the drought, the hail, the harvest frost. If his teams fall sick, or the season goes against him, he must work double tides. Still, it now and then happens that things go right, and the red wheat rolls ripe right back across the prairie. I don't know that any man could want a keener thrill than the one you feel when you drive the binders in!"

Agatha had imagination, and she could realise something of the toil, the hazard, and the clean thrill of that victory.

"You have felt it often?" she said.

"Twice we helped to fill a big elevator up," said Wyllard quietly. "Still, I've been very near defeat."

The girl looked at him thoughtfully. It seemed that he possessed the power of acquisition, as well as a wide generosity that came into play when by strenuous effort success had been attained, which, so far as her experience went, were things that did not invariably accompany each other.

"And when the harvest comes up to your expectations, you give your dollars away," she said.

Wyllard laughed. "You shouldn't deduce too much from a single instance. Besides, that Pole's case hasn't cost me anything yet."

Mrs. Hastings joined them soon afterwards, and when Wyllard strolled away they spent some time leaning on the rails, and looking at the groups of shadowy figures on the forward deck. Their attitude was dejected and melancholy, but one cluster had gathered round a man who stood upon the hatch.

"Yes," he said, "you'll have no trouble. Canada's a great country for a poor man. He can sleep beneath a bush all summer, if he can't strike anything he likes."

This did not appear particularly encouraging, but the orator went on. "Been over for a trip to the Old Country, and I'm glad I'm going back again. Went out with nothing except a good discharge, and they made me sergeant of Canadian militia: After that armourer to a rifle club. There's places

a blame long way behind the Dominion, and I struck one of them when we went with Roberts to Afghanistan. It was on that trip I and a Pathan rolled all down a hill, him trying to get his knife arm loose, and me jabbing his breastbone with my bayonet before I got it into him. I drove it through to the socket. You want to make quite sure of a Pathan."

Miss Rawlinson winced at this. "Oh," she said, "what a horrible man!"

"It was 'most as tough as when you went after Kiel, and stole the Scotchman's furs," suggested a Canadian.

The sergeant let the jibe go by. "Oh," he said, "Louis's bucks could shoot! We had them corralled in a pit, and every time one of the boys from Montreal broke cover he got a bullet into him. Did any of you ever hear a dropped man squeal?"

Agatha had heard sufficient, and she and her companions turned away, but as they moved across the deck the sergeant's voice followed her.

"Oh, yes," he said, "a grand country for a poolman. In the summer he can sleep beneath a bush."

For some reason this eulogy haunted Agatha when she retired to her room that night, and she wondered what awaited all those aliens in the new land, until it occurred to her that in some respects she was situated very much as they were. Then, for the first time, vague misgivings crept into her mind as she realised that she had cut herself adrift from all that she had been accustomed to. She felt suddenly depressed and lonely.

The depression had, however, almost vanished when, awakening rather early next morning, she went up on deck. A red sun hung over the tumbling seas that ran into the hazy east astern, and they rolled up in crested phalanxes that gleamed green and incandescent white ahead. The *Scarrowmania* plunged through them with a spray cloud flying about her dipping bows. She was a small, old-fashioned boat, and – for she had some 3,000 tons of railway iron in the bottom of her – she rolled distressfully. Her tall spars swayed athwart the vivid blueness of the morning sky, with the rhythmic regularity of a pendulum. The girl, however, was troubled by no sense of sickness; the keen north-wester that sang amidst the shrouds was wonderfully fresh; and when she met Wyllard crossing the saloon deck her cheeks were glowing from the sting of the spray, and her eyes were bright.

"Where have you been?" she asked.

"Down there," said Wyllard, pointing to the black opening in the fore-hatch that led to the steerage quarters. "An acquaintance of mine who's travelling forward asked me to take a look round, and I'm rather glad I did. When I've had a word with the chief steward I'm going back again."

"You have a friend down there?"

"I met the man for the first time yesterday, and rather took to him. One of your naval petty officers, forcibly retired, who can't live upon his pension, which is why he's going out to Canada. Now you'll excuse me."

"I wonder," said Agatha, "if you would let me go back with you?"

Wyllard looked at her rather curiously. "Well," he said, with an air of reflection, "you'll probably have to face a good deal that you don't like out yonder, and in one way you won't suffer from a little preparatory training. This, however, is not a case where sentimental pity is likely to relieve anybody. It's the real thing."

"I think I told you at Garside Scar that I haven't lived altogether in luxury!"

Wyllard, who made no comment, disappeared, and merely signed to her when he came back. They reached the ladder that led down into the gloom beneath the hatch, and Agatha hesitated when a sour and musty odour floated up to her, apparently out of the depths of the ship. She went down, however, and a few moments later stood, half-nauseated, gazing at the wildest scene of confusion her eyes had ever rested on. A little light came down the hatchway, and a smoky lamp or two swung above her head, but half the steerage deck was wrapped in shadow, and out of it there rose a many-voiced complaining. Flimsy, unplaned fittings had wrenched away, and men lay inert amidst the wreckage, with the remains of their last meal scattered about them. There were unwashed tin plates

and pannikins, knives, and spoons, sliding up and down everywhere, and the deck was foul with slops of tea, and trodden bread, and marmalade. Now and then, in a wilder roll than usual, a frowsy, huddled object slid groaning down the slant of slimy planking, but in every case the helpless passenger was fully dressed. Steerage passengers, in fact, seldom take off their clothes. For one thing, all their worldly possessions are, as a rule, secreted among their attire, and for another, most of those hailing from beyond the Danube have never been accustomed to disrobing. In the midst of the confusion, two half-sick steward lads were making wholly ineffective efforts to straighten up the mess.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.