Bower B. M.

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Содержание

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CHAPTER I
LET US START AT THE BEGINNING

Four trail-worn oxen, their necks bowed to the yoke of patient servitude, should really begin this story. But to follow the trail they made would take several chapters which you certainly would skip – unless you like to hear the tale of how the wilderness was tamed and can thrill at the stern history of those who did the taming while they fought to keep their stomachs fairly well filled with food and their hard-muscled bodies fit for the fray.

There was a woman, low-browed, uncombed, harsh of voice and speech and nature, who drove the four oxen forward over lava rock and rough prairie and the scanty sage. I might tell you a great deal about Marthy, who plodded stolidly across the desert and the low-lying hills along the Blackfoot; and of her weak-souled, shiftless husband whom she called Jase, when she did not call him worse.

They were the pioneers whose lurching wagon first forded the singing Wolverine stream just where it greens the tiny valley

and then slips between huge lava-rock ledges to join the larger stream. Jase would have stopped there and called home the sheltered little green spot in the gray barrenness. But Marthy went on, up the farther hill and across the upland, another full day's journey with the sweating oxen.

They camped that night on another little, singing stream, in another little valley, which was not so level or so green or so wholly pleasing to the eye. And that night two of the oxen, impelled by a surer instinct than their human owners, strayed away down a narrow, winding gorge and so discovered the Cove and feasted upon its rich grasses. It was Marthy who went after them and who recognized the little, hidden Eden as the place of her dreams – supposing she ever had dreams. So Marthy and Jase and the four oxen took possession, and with much labor and many hard years for the woman, and with the same number of years and as little labor as he could manage on the man's part, they tamed the Cove and made it a beauty spot in that wild land. A beauty spot, though their lives held nothing but treadmill toil and harsh words and a mental horizon narrowed almost to the limits of the grim, gray, rock wall that surrounded them.

Another sturdy-souled couple came afterwards and saw the Wolverine and made for themselves a home upon its banks. And in the rough little log cabin was born the girl-child I want you to meet; a girl-child when she should have been a boy to meet her father's need and great desire; a girl-child whose very name was a compromise between the parents. For they called her Billy

for sake of the boy her father wanted, and Louise for the girl her mother had longed for to lighten that terrible loneliness which the far frontier brings to the women who brave its stern emptiness.

Do you like children? In other words, are you human? Then I want you to meet Billy Louise when she was ten and had lived all her life among the rocks and the sage and the stunted cedars and huge, gray hills of Idaho. Meet her with her pink sunbonnet hanging down the back of her neck and her big eyes taking in the squalidness of Marthy's crude kitchen in the Cove, and her terrible directness of speech hitting squarely the things she saw that were different from her own immaculate home. Of course, if you don't care for children, you may skip a chapter and meet her later when she was eighteen – but I really wish you would consent to know her at ten.

"Mommie makes cookies with a raising in the middle. She gives me two sometimes when the Bill of me has been workin' like the deuce with dad; one for Billy and one for Louise. When I'm twelve, Mommie's goin' to let the Louise of me make cookies all myself and put a raising on top. I'll put two on top of one and bring it over for you, Marthy. And – " Billy Louise was terribly outspoken at times – "I'll put four raisings on another one for Jase, 'cause he don't have any nice times with you. Don't you ever make cookies with raisings on 'em, Marthy? I'm hungry as a coyote – and I ain't used to eating just bread and the kinda butter you have. Mom says you don't work it enough. She says you are too scared of water, and the buttermilk ain't all worked out, so

that's why it tastes so funny. Does Jase like that kind of butter, Marthy?"

"If your mother had to do the outside work as well as the inside, mebbe she wouldn't work her butter so awful much, either. I dunno whether Jase likes it or not. He eats it," Marthy stated grimly.

Billy Louise sighed. "Well, of course he's awful lazy. Daddy says so. I guess I won't put but one raising on Jase's cookie when I'm twelve. Has Jase gone fishing again, Marthy?"

A gleam of satisfaction brightened Marthy's hard, blue eyes. "No, he ain't. He's in the root suller. You want some bread and some nice, new honey, Billy Louise? I jest took it outa the hive this morning. When you go home, I'll send some to your maw if you can carry it."

"Sure! I can carry anything that's good. If you put it on thick, so I can't taste the bread, I'll eat it. Say, you like me, don't you, Marthy?"

"Yes," said Marthy, turning her back on the slim, wide-eyed girl, "I like yuh, Billy Louise."

"You sound like you wish you didn't," Billy Louise remarked. Even at ten Billy Louise was keenly sensitive to tones and glances and that intangible thing we call atmosphere. "Are you sorry you like me?"

"No-o, I ain't sorry. A person's got to like something that's alive and human, or – " Marthy was clumsy with words, and she was always coming to the barrier between her powers

of expression and the thoughts that were prisoned and dumb. "Here's your bread 'n' honey."

"What makes you sound that way, Marthy? You sound like you had tears inside, and they couldn't get out your eyes. Are you sad? Did you ever have a little girl, Marthy?"

"What makes you ask that?" Marthy sat heavily down upon a box beside the rough kitchen table and looked at Billy Louise queerly, as if she were half afraid of her.

"I dunno – but that's the way mommie sounds when she says something about angel-brother. Did you ever – "

"Billy Louise, I'm going to tell you this oncet, and then I don't want you to ast me any more questions, nor talk about it. You're the queerest young one I ever seen, but you don't hurt folks on purpose – I've learnt that much about yuh." Marthy half rose from the box, and with her dingy, patched apron shooed an investigative hen out of the doorway. She knew that Billy Louise was regarding her fixedly over the huge, uneven slice of bread and honey, and she felt vaguely that a child's grave, inquiring eyes may be the hardest of all eyes to meet.

"I never meant – "

"I know yuh never, Billy Louise. Now don't tell your maw this. Long ago – long before your maw ever found you, or your paw ever found your ranch on the Wolverine, I had a little girl, 'bout like you. She was a purty child – her hair was like silk, and her eyes was blue, and – we was Mormons, and we lived down clost to Salt Lake. And I seen so much misery amongst the women-

folks – you can't understand that, but mebby you will when you grow up. Anyway, when little Minervy kep' growin' purtyer and sweeter, I couldn't stand it to think of her growin' up and bein' a Mormon's wife. I seen so many purty girls… So I made up my mind we'd move away off somewheres, where Minervy could grow up jest as sweet and purty as she was a mind to, and not have to suffer fer her sweetness and her purtyness. When you grow up, Billy Louise, you'll know what I mean. So me and Jase packed up – we kinda had to do it on the sly, on account uh the bishops – and we struck out with a four-ox team.

"We kep' a-goin' and kep' a-goin', fer I was scared to settle too clost. I seen how they keep spreadin' out all the time, and I wanted to git so fur away they wouldn't ketch up. And we got into bad country, where there wasn't no water skurcely. We swung too fur north, and got into the desert back there. And over next them three buttes little Minervy took sick. We tried to git outa the desert – we headed over this way. But before we got to Snake river she – died, and I had to leave 'er buried back there. We come on. I hated the church worse than ever, and I wanted to git clear away from 'em. Why, Billy Louise, we camped one night by the Wolverine, right about where your paw's got his big corral! We didn't stay there, because it was an Injun camping-ground then, and they wasn't no use getting mixed up in no fuss, first thing. In them days the Injuns wasn't so peaceable as they be now. So we come on here and settled in the Cove.

"And so – I like yuh," said Marthy, in a tone that was half

defiance, "because I can't help likin' yuh. You're growin' up sweet and purty, jest like I wanted my little Minervy to grow up. In some ways you remind me of her, only she was quieter and didn't take so much notice of things a young one ain't s'posed to notice. Now I don't want you askin' no more questions about her, 'cause I ain't going to talk about it ag'in; and if yuh pester me, I'll send yuh home and tell your maw to keep yuh there. If you're the nice girl I think yuh be, you'll be good to Marthy and not talk about – "

Billy Louise opened her eyes still wider, and licked the honey off one whole corner of the slice without really tasting anything. Marthy's square, uncompromising chin was actually quivering. Billy Louise was stricken dumb by the spectacle. She wanted to go and put her arms around Marthy's neck and kiss her; only Marthy's neck had a hairy mole, and there was no part of her face which looked in the least degree kissable. Still, Billy Louise felt herself all hot inside with remorse and sympathy and affection. Physical contact being impossible because of her fastidious instincts, and speech upon the subject being so sternly forbidden, Billy Louise continued to lick honey and stare in fascinated silence.

"I'll wash the dishes for you, Marthy," she offered irrelevantly at last, as a supreme sacrifice upon the altar of sympathy. When that failed to stop the slow procession of tears that was traveling down the furrows of Marthy's cheeks, she added ingratiatingly: "I'll put six raisings on the cookie I'm going to make for you."

Whereupon Marthy did an unprecedented, an utterly amazing

thing. She got up and gathered Billy Louise into her arms so unexpectedly that Billy Louise inadvertently buried her nose in the honey she had not yet licked off the bread. Marthy held her close pressed to her big, flabby bosom and wept into her hair in a queer, whimpering way that somehow made Billy Louise think of a hurt dog. It was only for a minute that Marthy did this; she stopped almost as suddenly as she began and went outside, wiping her eyes and her nose impartially upon her dirty apron.

Billy Louise sat paralyzed with the mixture of unusual emotions that assailed her. She was exceedingly sticky and uncomfortable from honey and tears, and she shivered with repugnance at the odor of Marthy's unbathed person. She was astonished at the outburst from phlegmatic Marthy Meilke, and her pity was now alloyed with her promise to wash all those dirty dishes. Billy Louise felt that she had been a trifle hasty in making promises. There was not a drop of water in the house nor a bit of wood, and Billy Louise knew perfectly well that the dishpan would have a greasy, unpleasant feeling under her fastidious little fingers.

She sighed heavily. "Well, I s'pose I might just as well get to work at 'em," she said aloud, as was her habit – being a child who had no playmates. "I hate to dread a thing I hate."

She looked at the messy slice of sour bread and threw it out to the speckled hen that had returned and was standing with one foot lifted tentatively – ready for a forward step if the fates seemed kind – and was regarding Billy Louise fixedly with one

yellow eye. "Take it and go!" cried the donor, impatient of the scrutiny. She picked up the wooden pail and went down to the creek behind the house, by a pathway bordered thickly with budding rosebushes and tall lilacs.

Billy Louise first of all washed her face slowly and with a methodic thoroughness which characterized her – having lived for ten full years with no realization of hours and minutes as a measure for her actions. She dried her face quite as deliberately upon her starched calico apron. Then she spent a few minutes trying to catch a baby trout in her cupped palms. Never had Billy Louise succeeded in catching a baby trout in her hands; therefore she never tired of trying. Now, however, that rash promise nagged at her and would not let her enjoy the game as completely as usual. She took the wooden pail, and squatting on her heels in the wet sand, waited until a small school swam incautiously close to the bank, and scooped suddenly, with a great splash. She caught three tiny, speckled fish the length of her little finger, and she let the half-full pail rest in the shallow stream while she watched the fry swimming excitedly round and round within.

There was no great fun in that. Billy Louise could catch baby trout in a pail at home, from the waters of the Wolverine, whenever she liked. Many a time she had kept them in a big bottle until she tired of watching them, or they died because she forgot to change the water often enough. She could not get even a languid enjoyment out of them now, because she could not for

a minute forget that she had promised to wash Marthy's dishes – and Marthy always had so many dirty dishes! And Marthy's dishpan was so greasy! Billy Louise gave a little shudder when she thought of it.

"I wish her little girl hadn't died," she said, her mind swinging from effect back to cause. "I could play with her. And she'd wash the dishes herself. I'm going to name my new little pig Minervy. I wish she hadn't died. I'd show her my little pig, if Marthy'd let her come over to our place. We could both ride on old Badger; Minervy could ride behind me, and we'd go places together." Billy Louise meditatively stirred up the baby trout with a forefinger. "We'd go up the canyon and have the caves for our play-houses. Minervy could have the secret cave away up the hill, and I'd have the other one across from it; and we'd have flags and wigwag messages like daddy tells about in the war. And we'd play the rabbits are Injuns, and the coyotes are big-Injun-chiefs sneaking down to see if the forts are watching. And whichever seen a coyote first would wigwag to the other one…" A baby trout, taking advantage of the pail tipping in the current, gave a flip over the edge and interrupted Billy Louise's fancies. She gave the pail a tilt and spilled out the other two fish. Then she filled it as full as she could carry and started back to pay the price of her sympathy.

"I don't see what Minervy had to go and die for!" she complained, dodging a low-hanging branch of bloom-laden lilac. "She could wash the dishes and I'd wipe 'em – and I s'pose there

ain't a clean dish-towel in the house, either! Marthy's an awful slack housekeeper."

Billy Louise, being a young person with a conscience – of a sort – washed the dishes, since she had given her word to do it. The dishpan was even more unpleasant than experience had foretold for her; and of Marthy's somewhat meager supply there seemed not one clean dish in the house. The sympathy of Billy Louise therefore waned rapidly; rather, it turned in upon itself. So that by the time she felt morally free to spend the rest of the afternoon as she pleased, she was not at all sorry for Marthy for having lost Minervy; instead, she was sorry for herself for having been betrayed into rashness and for being deprived of a playmate.

"I don't s'pose Marthy doctored her right, at all," she considered pitilessly, as she returned down the lilac-bordered path. "If she had, I guess she wouldn't have died. I'll bet she never gave her a speck of sage tea, like mommie always does when I'm sick – only I ain't ever, thank goodness. I'm just going to ask Jase if Marthy did."

On the way to the root cellar, which was dug into the creek-bank well above high-water mark, Billy Louise debated within herself the ethics of speaking to Jase upon a forbidden subject. Jase had been Minervy's father, and therefore knew of her existence, so that mentioning Minervy to him could not in any sense be betraying a secret. She wondered if Jase felt badly about it, as Marthy seemed to do. On the heels of that came the determination to test his emotional capacity.

At the root cellar her attention was diverted. The cellar door was fastened on the outside, with the iron hasp used to protect the store of vegetables from the weather. Jase must be gone. She was turning away when she heard him clear his throat with that peculiar little hacking, rasping noise which sounded exactly as one would expect a Jase to sound. Billy Louise puckered her eyebrows, pressed her lips together understandingly – and disapprovingly – and opened the door.

Jase, humped over a heap of sprouting potatoes, blinked up apathetically into the sudden flood of sweet, spring air and sunshine. "Why, hello, Billy Louise," he mumbled, his eyes brightening a bit.

"Say, you was locked in here!" Billy Louise faced him puzzled. "Did you know you was locked in?"

"Yes-s, I knowed it. Marthy, she locked the door." Jase reached out a bony hand covered with carrot-colored hairs and picked up a shriveling potato with long, sickly sprouts proclaiming life's persistence in perpetuating itself under adverse circumstances. He broke off the sprouts with a wipe of his dirty palm and threw the potato into a heap in the corner.

"What for?" Billy Louise demanded, watching Jase reach languidly out for another potato.

"She seen me diggin' bait," Jase said tonelessly. "I did think some of ketchin' a mess of fish before I went to sproutin' p'tatoes, but Marthy she don't take no int'rest in nothin' but work."

"Are the fish biting good?" Billy Louise glanced toward the

wider stream, where it showed through a gap in the alders.

"Yes-s, purty good now. I caught a nice mess the other day; but Marthy, she don't favor my goin' fishin'." The lean hands of Jase moved slowly at his task. Billy Louise, watching him, wondered why he did not hurry a little and finish sooner. Still, she could not remember ever seeing Jase hurry at anything, and the Cove with its occupants was one of her very earliest memories.

"Say, I'll dig some more bait, and then we'll go fishing; shall we?"

"I – dunno as I better – " Jase's hand hovered aimlessly over the potato pile. "I got quite a lot sprouted, though – and mebby – "

"I'll lock you in till I get the bait dug," suggested Billy Louise craftily. "And you work fast; and then I'll let you out, and we'll lock the door agin, so Marthy'll think you're in there yet."

"You're sure smart to think up things," Jase admired, smiling loose-lipped behind his scraggly beard, that was fading with the years. "I dunno but what it'd serve Marthy right. She ain't got no call to lock the door on me. She hates like sin t' see me with a fish-pole in m' hand – but she's always et her share uh the messes I ketch. She ain't a reasonable woman, Marthy ain't. You git the bait. I'll show Marthy who's boss in this Cove!"

He might have encouraged himself into defying Marthy to her face, in another five minutes of complaining. But the cellar door closed upon him with a slam. Billy Louise was not interested in his opinion of Marthy; with her, opinions were valueless if not accompanied by action.

"I never thought to ask him about Minervy," occurred to her while she was relentlessly dragging pale, fleshly fishworms from the loose black soil of Marthy's onion bed. "But I know she was mean to Minervy. She's awful mean to Jase – locking him up in the root cellar just 'cause he wanted to go fishing. If I was Jase I wouldn't sprout a single old potato for her. My goodness, but she'll be mad when she opens the cellar door and Jase ain't in there; I – guess I'll go home early, before Marthy finds it out."

She really meant to do that, but the fish were hungry fish that day, and the joy of having a companion to exclaim with her over every hard tug – even though that companion was only Jase – enticed her to stay on and on, until a whiff of frying pork on the breeze that swept down the Cove warned Billy Louise of the near approach of supper-time.

"I guess mebby I might as well go back to the suller," Jase remarked, his defiance weakening as he climbed the bank. "You come and lock the door agin, Billy Louise, and Marthy won't know I ain't been there all the time. She'll think you caught the fish." He looked at her with a weak leer of conscious cunning.

Billy Louise, groping vaguely for the sunbonnet that was dangling between her straight shoulder-blades, stared at him with wide eyes that held disillusionment and with it a contempt all the keener because it was the contempt of a child, whose judgment is merciless.

"I should thing you'd be ashamed!" she said at last, forgetting that the idea had been born in her own brain. "Cowards do things

and then sneak about it. Daddy says so. I don't care if Marthy is mad 'cause I let you out, and I don't care if she knows we went fishing. I thought you wanted Marthy to see she ain't so smart, locking you up in the cellar. I ain't going to bake you a single cookie with raisings on it, like I was going to."

"Marthy's got a sharp tongue in 'er head," Jase wavered, his eyes shifting from Billy Louise's uncompromising stare.

"Daddy says when you do a thing that's mean, do it and take your medicine," Billy Louise retorted. "The boy of me that belongs to dad ain't a sneak, Jase Meilke. And," she added loftily, "the girl of me that belongs to mommie is a perfeck lady. Good day, Mr. Meilke. Thank you for a pleasant time fishing."

Whereupon the perfect lady part switched short skirts up the path and held a tousled head high with disdain.

Jase, thus deserted, went shambling back to the cellar and fell to sprouting potatoes with what might almost be termed industry.

It pained Jase later to discover that Marthy was not interested in the open door, but in the very small heap of potatoes which he had "sprouted" that afternoon. There was other work to be done in the Cove, and there were but two pairs of hands to do it; that one pair was slow and shiftless and inefficient was bitterly accepted by Marthy, who worked from sunrise until dark to make up for the shirking of those other hands.

It was the trail experience over again, and it was an experience that dragged through the years without change or betterment. Marthy wanted to "get ahead." Jase wanted to sit in the sun with

his knees drawn up, just – I don't know what, but I suppose he called it thinking. When he felt unusually energetic, he liked to dangle an impaled worm over a trout pool. Theoretically he also wanted to get ahead and to have a fine ranch and lots of cattle and a comfortable home. He would plan these things sometimes in an expansive mood, whereupon Marthy would stare at him with her hard, contemptuous look until Jase trailed off into mumbling complaints into his beard. He was not as able-bodied as she thought he was, he would say, with vague solemnity. Some uh these days Marthy'd see how she had driven him beyond his strength.

When one is a Marthy, however, with ambitions and a tireless energy and the persistence of a beaver, and when one listens to vague mutterings for many hard laboring years, one grows accustomed to the complainings and fails to see certain warning symptoms of which even the complainer is only vaguely aware.

She kept on working through the years, and as far as was humanly possible she kept Jase working. She did not soften, except toward Billy Louise, who rode sometimes over from her father's ranch on the Wolverine to the flowery delights of the Cove. The place was a perfect jungle of sweetness, seven months of each year; for Marthy owned and indulged a love of beauty, even if she could not realize her dream of prosperity. Wherever was space in the house-yard for a flower or a fruit tree or a berry bush, Marthy planted one or the other. You could not see the cabin from April until the leaves fell in late October, except in a

fragmentary way as you walked around it. You went in at a gate of pickets which Marthy herself had split and nailed in place; you followed a narrow, winding path through the sweet jungle – and if you were tall, you stooped now and then to pass under an apple branch. And unless you looked up at the black, lava-rock rim of the bluff which cupped this Eden incongruously, you would forget that just over the brim lay parched plain and barren mountain.

When Billy Louise was twelve, she had other ambitions than the making of cookies with "raisings" on them. She wanted to do something big, though she was hazy as to the particular nature of that big something. She tried to talk it over with Marthy, but Marthy could not seem to think beyond the Cove, except that now and then Billy Louise would suspect that her mind did travel to the desert and Minervy's grave. Marthy's hair was growing streaked with yellowish gray, though it never grew less unkempt and dusty looking. Her eyes were harder, if anything, except when they rested on Billy Louise.

When she was thirteen, Billy Louise rode over with a loaf of bread she had baked all by herself, and she put this problem to Marthy:

"I've been thinking I'd go ahead and write poetry, Marthy – a whole book of it with pictures. But I do love to make bread – and people have to eat bread. Which would you be, Marthy; a poet, or a cook?"

Marthy looked at her a minute, lent her attention briefly to the

question, and gave what she considered good advice.

"You learn how to cook, Billy Louise. Yuh don't want to go and get notions. Your maw ain't healthy, and your paw likes good grub. Po'try is all foolishness; there ain't any money in it."

"Walter Scott paid his debts writing poetry," said Billy Louise argumentatively. She had just read all about Walter Scott in a magazine which a passing cowboy had given her; perhaps that had something to do with her new ambition.

"Mebby he did and mebby he didn't. I'd like to see our debts paid off with po'try. It'd have to be worth a hull lot more 'n what I'd give for it."

"Oh. Have you got debts too, Marthy?" Billy Louise at thirteen was still ready with sympathy. "Daddy's got lots and piles of 'em. He bought some cattle and now he talks to mommie all the time about debts. Mommie wants me to go to Boise to school, next winter, to Aunt Sarah's. And daddy says there's debts to pay. I didn't know you had any, Marthy."

"Well, I have got. We bought some cattle, too – and they ain't done 's well 's they might. If I had a man that was any good on earth, I could put up more hay. But I can't git nothing outa Jase but whines. Your paw oughta send you to school, Billy Louise, even if he has got debts. I'd 'a' sent – "

She stopped there, but Billy Louise knew how she finished the sentence mentally. She would have sent Minervy to school.

"Your paw ain't got any right to keep you outa school," Marthy went on aggressively. "Debts er no debts, he'd see 't you got

schoolin' – if he was the right kinda man."

"Daddy is the right kinda man. He ain't like Jase. He says he wishes he could, but he don't know where the money's coming from."

"How much's it goin' to take?" asked Marthy heavily.

"Oh, piles." Billy Louise spoke airily to hide her pride in the importance of the subject. "Fifty dollars, I guess. I've got to have some new clothes, mommie says. I'd like a blue dress."

"And your paw can't raise fifty dollars?" Marthy's tone was plainly belligerent.

"Got to pay interest," said Billy Louise importantly.

Marthy said not another word about debts or the duties of parents. What she did was more to the point, however, for she hitched the mules to a rattly old buckboard next day and drove over to the MacDonald ranch on the Wolverine. She carried fifty dollars in her pocket – and that was practically all the money Marthy possessed, and had been saved for the debts that harassed her. She gave the money to Billy Louise's mother and said that it was a present for Billy Louise, and meant for "school money." She said that she hadn't any girl of her own to spend the money on, and that Billy Louise was a good girl and a smart girl, and she wanted to do a little something toward her schooling.

A woman will sacrifice more pride than you would believe, if she sees a way toward helping her children to an education. Mrs. MacDonald took the money, and she promised secrecy – with a feeling of relief that Marthy wished it. She was astonished

to find that Marthy had any feelings not directly connected with work or the shortcomings of Jase, but she never suspected that Marthy had made any sacrifice for Billy Louise.

So Billy Louise went away to school and never knew whose money had made it possible to go, and Marthy worked harder and drove Jase more relentlessly to make up that fifty dollars. She never mentioned the matter to anyone. The next year it was the same; when, in August, she questioned Billy Louise clumsily upon the subject of finances, and learned that "daddy" still talked about debts and interest and didn't know where the money was coming from, she drove over again with money for the "schooling." And again she extracted a promise of silence.

She did this for four years, and not a soul knew that it cost her anything in the way of extra work and extra harassment of mind. She bought more cattle and cut more hay and went deeper into debt; for as Billy Louise grew older and prettier and more accustomed to the ways of town, she needed more money, and the August gift grew proportionately larger. The mother was thankful beyond the point of questioning. An August without Marthy and Marthy's gift of money would have been a tragedy; and so selfish is mother-love sometimes that she would have accepted the gift even if she had known what it cost the giver.

At eighteen, then, Billy Louise knew some things not taught by the wide plains and the wild hills around her. She was not spoiled by her little learning, which was a good thing. And when her father died tragically beneath an overturned load of poles

from the mountain at the head of the canyon, Billy Louise came home. The Billy of her tried to take his place, and the Louise of her attempted to take care of her mother, who was unfitted both by nature and habit to take care of herself. Which was, after all, a rather big thing for anyone to attempt.

CHAPTER II
A STORM AND A STRANGER

Jase began to complain of having "all-gone" feelings during the winter after Billy Louise came home and took up the whole burden of the Wolverine ranch. He complained to Billy Louise, when she rode over one clear, sunny day in January; he said that he was getting old – which was perfectly true – and that he was not as able-bodied as he might be, and didn't expect to last much longer. Billy Louise spoke of it to Marthy, and Marthy snorted.

"He's able-bodied enough at mealtimes, I notice," she retorted. "I've heard that tune ever since I knowed him; he can't fool me!"

"Not about the all-goneness, have you?" Billy Louise was preparing to wipe the dishes for Marthy. "I know he always had 'cricks' in different parts of his anatomy, but I never heard about his feeling all-gone, before. That sounds mysterious, don't you think?"

"No; and he never had nothin' the matter with his anatomy, neither; his anatomy's just as sound as mine. Jase was born lazy, is all ails him."

"But, Marthy, haven't you noticed he doesn't look as well as he used to? He has a sort of gray look, don't you think? And his eyes are so puffy underneath, lately."

"No, I ain't noticed nothing wrong with him that ain't always been wrong." Marthy spoke grudgingly, as if she resented even the possibility of Jase's having a real ailment. "He's feelin' his years, mebby. But he ain't no call to; Jase ain't but three years older 'n I be, and I ain't but fifty-nine last birthday. And I've worked and slaved here in this Cove fer twenty-seven years, now; what it is I've made it. Jase ain't ever done a hand's turn that he wasn't obliged to do. I've chopped wood, and I've built corrals and dug ditches, and Jase has puttered around and whined that he wasn't able-bodied enough to do no heavy lifting. That there orchard out there I planted and packed water in buckets to it till I got the ditch through. Them corrals down next the river I built. I dug the post-holes, and Jase set the posts in and held 'em steady while I tamped the dirt! In winter I've hauled hay and fed the cattle; and Jase, he packed a bucket uh slop, mebby, to the pigs! If he ain't as able-bodied as I be, it's because he ain't done nothing to git strong on. He can't come around me now with that all-gone feeling uh his; I know Jase Meilke like a book."

There was more that she said about Jase. Standing there, a squat, unkempt woman with a seamed, leathery face and hard eyes now quite faded to gray, she told Billy Louise a good deal of the bitterness of the years behind; years of hardship and of slavish toil and no love to lighten it. She spoke again of Minervy, and the name brought back to Billy Louise poignant memories of her own lonely childhood and of her "pretend" playmate.

Half shyly, because she was still sometimes touched with the

inarticulateness of youth, Billy Louise told Marthy a little of that playmate. "Why, do you know, every time I rode old Badger anywhere, after that day you told me about Minervy, I used to pretend that Minervy rode behind me. I used to talk to her by the hour and take her places. And up our canyon is a cave that I used to play was Minervy's cave. I had another one, and I used to go over and visit Minervy. And I had another pretend playmate – a boy – and we used to have adventures. It's a queer place; I just found that cave by accident. I don't believe there's another person in the country who knows it's there at all. Well, that's Minervy's cave to me yet. And, Marthy – " Billy Louise giggled a little and eyed the old woman with a sidelong look that would have set a young man's blood a-jump – "I hope you won't be mad; I was just a kid, and I didn't know any better. But just to show you how much I thought: I had a little pig, and I named it Minervy, after you told me about her. And mommie told me that was no name for it; it was – it wasn't a girl pig, mommie said. So I called it Man-ervy, as the next best thing." She gave Marthy another wasted glance from the corners of her eyes. "Oh, Marthy!" she cried remorsefully, setting down the gravy bowl that she might pat Marthy on her fat, age-rounded shoulder. "What a little beast I am! I shouldn't have told that; but honest, I thought it was an honor. I – I just worshiped that pig!"

Jase maundered in at that moment, and Marthy, catching up a corner of her dirty apron – Billy Louise could not remember ever seeing Marthy in a perfectly clean dress or apron – wiped away

what traces of emotion her weathered face could reveal. Also, she turned and glared at Jase with what Billy Louise considered a perfectly uncalled-for animosity. In reality, Marthy was covertly looking for visible symptoms of the all-goneness. She shut her harsh lips together tightly at what she saw; Jase certainly was puffy under his watery, pink-rimmed eyes, and the withered cheeks above his thin graying beard really did have a pasty, gray look.

"D' you turn them calves out into the corral?" she demanded, her voice harder because of her secret uneasiness.

"I was goin' to, but the wind's changed into the north, 'n' I thought mebby you wouldn't want 'em out." Jase turned back aimlessly to the door. His voice was getting cracked and husky, and the deprecating note dominated pathetically all that he said. "You'll have to face the wind goin' home," he said to Billy Louise. "More 'n likely you'll be facin' snow, too. Looks bad, off that way."

"You go on and turn them calves out!" Marthy commanded him harshly. "Billy Louise ain't goin' home if it storms; I sh'd think you'd know enough to know that."

"Oh, but I'll have to go, anyway," the girl interrupted. "Mommie can't be there alone; she'd worry herself to death if I didn't show up by dark. She worries about every little thing since daddy died. I ought to have gone before – or I oughtn't to have come. But she was worrying about you, Marthy; she hadn't seen or heard of you for a month, and she was afraid you might be

sick or something. Why don't you get someone to stay with you? I think you ought to."

She looked toward the door, which Jase had closed upon his departure. "If Jase should – get sick, or anything – "

"Jase ain't goin' to git sick," Marthy retorted glumly. "Yuh don't want to let him worry yuh, Billy Louise. If I'd worried every time he yowled around about being sick, I'd be dead or crazy by now. I dunno but maybe I'll have somebody to help with the work, though," she added, after a pause during which she had swiped the dish-rag around the sides of the pan once or twice, and had opened the door and thrown the water out beyond the doorstep like the sloven she was. "I got a nephew that wants to come out. He's been in a bank, but he's quit and wants to git on to a ranch. I dunno but I'll have him come, in the spring."

"Do," urged Billy Louise, perfectly unconscious of the potentialities of the future. "I hate to think of you two down here alone. I don't suppose anyone ever comes down here, except me – and that isn't often."

"Nobody's got any call to come down," said Marthy stolidly. "They sure ain't going to come for our comp'ny and there ain't nothing else to bring 'em."

"Well, there aren't many to come, you know," laughed Billy Louise, shaking out the dish towel and spreading it over two nails, as she did at home. "I'm your nearest neighbor, and I've got six miles to ride – against the wind, at that. I think I'd better start. We've got a halfbreed doing chores for us, but he has to be looked

after or he neglects things. I'll not get another chance to come very soon, I'm afraid; mommie hates to have me ride around much in the winter. You send for that nephew right away, why don't you, Marthy?" It was like Billy Louise to mix command and entreaty together. "Really, I don't think Jase looks a bit well."

"A good strong steepin' of sage'll fix him all right, only he ain't sick, as I see. You take this shawl."

Billy Louise refused the shawl and ran down the twisted path fringed with long, reaching fingers of the hare berry bushes. At the stable she stopped for an aimless dialogue with Jase and then rode away, past the orchard whose leafless branches gave glimpses of the low, sod-roofed cabin, with Marthy standing rather disconsolately on the rough doorstep watching her go.

Absently she let down the bars in the narrowest place in the gorge and lifted them into their rude sockets after she had led her horse through. All through the years since Marthy had gone down that rocky gash in search of Buck and Bawley, no human being had entered or left the Cove save through that narrow opening. The tingle of romance which swept always the nerves of the girl when she rode that way fastened upon her now. She wished the Cove belonged to her; she thought she would like to live in a place like that, with warlike Indians all around and that gorge to guard day and night. She wished she had been Marthy, discovering that place and taming it, little by little, in solitary achievement the sweeter because it had been hard.

"It's a bigger thing," said Billy Louise aloud to her horse, "to

make a home here in this wilderness, than to write the greatest poem in the world or paint the greatest picture or – anything. I wish…"

Blue was climbing steadily out of the gorge, twitching an ear backward with flattering attention when his lady spoke. He held it so for a minute, waiting for that sentence to be finished, perhaps; for he was wise beyond his kind – was Blue. But his lady was staring at the rock wall they were passing then, where the winds and the cold and heat had carved jutting ledges into the crude form of cabbages; though Billy Louise preferred to call them roses. Always they struck her with a new wonder, as if she saw them for the first time. Blue went on, calmly stepping over this rock and, around that as if it were the simplest thing in the world to find sure footing and carry his lady smoothly up that trail. He threw up his head so suddenly that Billy Louise was startled out of her aimless dreamings, and pointed nose and ears toward the little creek-bottom above, where Marthy had lighted her camp-fire long and long ago.

A few steps farther, and Blue stopped short in the trail to look and listen. Billy Louise could see the nervous twitchings of his muscles under the skin of neck and shoulders, and she smiled to herself. Nothing could ever come upon her unaware when she rode alone, so long as she rode Blue. A hunting dog was not more keenly alive to his surroundings.

"Go on, Blue," she commanded after a minute. "If it's a bear or anything like that, you can make a run for it; if it's a wolf, I'll

shoot it. You needn't stand here all night, anyway."

Blue went on, out from behind the willow growth that hid the open. He returned to his calm, picking a smooth trail through the scattered rocks and tiny washouts. It was the girl's turn to stare and speculate. She did not know this horseman who sat negligently in the saddle and looked up at the cedar-grown bluff beyond, while his horse stood knee-deep in the little stream. She did not know him; and there were not so many travelers in the land that strangers were a matter of indifference.

Blue welcomed the horse with a democratic nicker and went forward briskly. And the rider turned his head, eyed the girl sharply as she came up, and nodded a cursory greeting. His horse lifted its head to look, decided that it wanted another swallow or two, and lowered its muzzle again to the water.

Billy Louise could not form any opinion of the man's age or personality, for he was encased in a wolfskin coat which covered him completely from hatbrim to ankles. She got an impression of a thin, dark face, and a sharp glance from eyes that seemed dark also. There was a thin, high nose, and beyond that Billy Louise did not look. If she had, the mouth must certainly have reassured her somewhat.

Blue stepped nonchalantly down into the stream beside the strange horse and went across without stopping to drink. The strange horse moved on also, as if that were the natural thing to do – which it was, since chance sent them traveling the same trail. Billy Louise set her teeth together with the queer little vicious

click that had always been her habit when she felt thwarted and constrained to yield to circumstances, and straightened herself in the saddle.

"Looks like a storm," the fur-coated one observed, with a perfectly transparent attempt to lighten the awkwardness.

Billy Louise tilted her chin upward and gazed at the gray sweep of clouds moving sullenly toward the mountains at her back. She glanced at the man and caught him looking intently at her face.

He did not look away immediately, as he should have done, and Billy Louise felt a little heat-wave of embarrassment, emphasized by resentment.

"Are you going far?" he queried in the same tone he had employed before.

"Six miles," she answered shortly, though she tried to be decently civil.

"I've about eighteen," he said. "Looks like we'll both get caught out in a blizzard."

Certainly, he had a pleasant enough voice – and after all it was not his fault that he happened to be at the crossing when she rode out of the gorge. Billy Louise, in common justice, laid aside her resentment and looked at him with a hint of a smile at the corners of her lips.

"That's what we have to expect when we travel in this country in the winter," she replied. "Eighteen miles will take you long after dark."

"Well, I was sort of figuring on putting up at some ranch, if it got too bad. There's a ranch somewhere ahead, on the Wolverine, isn't there?"

"Yes." Billy Louise bit her lip; but hospitality is an unwritten law of the West – a law not to be lightly broken. "That's where I live. We'll be glad to have you stop there, of course."

The stranger must have felt and admired the unconscious dignity of her tone and words, for he thanked her simply and refrained from looking too intently at her face.

Fine siftings of snow, like meal flung down from a gigantic sieve, swept into their faces as they rode on. The man turned his face toward her after a long silence. She was riding with bowed head and face half turned from him and the wind alike.

"You'd better ride on ahead and get in out of this," he said curtly. "Your horse is fresh. It's going to be worse and more of it, before long; this cayuse of mine has had thirty miles or so of rough going."

"I think I'd better wait for you," she said primly. "There are bad places where the trail goes close to the bluff, and the lava rock will be slippery with this snow. And it's getting dark so fast that a stranger might go over."

"If that's the case, the sooner you are past the bad places the better. I'm all right. You drift along."

Billy Louise speculated briefly upon the note of calm authority in his voice. He did not know, evidently, that she was more accustomed to giving commands than to obeying them; her

lips gave a little quirk of amusement at his mistake.

"You go on. I don't want a guide." He tilted his head peremptorily toward the blurred trail ahead.

Billy Louise laughed a little. She did not feel in the least embarrassed now. "Do you never get what you don't want?" she asked him mildly. "I'd a lot rather lead you past those places than have you go over the edge," she said, "because nobody could get you up, or even go down and bury you decently. It wouldn't be a bit nice. It's much simpler to keep you on top."

He said something, but Billy Louise could not hear what it was; she suspected him of swearing. She rode on in silence.

"Blue's a dandy horse on bad trails and in the dark," she observed companionably at last. "He simply can't lose his footing or his way."

"Yes? That's nice."

Billy Louise felt like putting out her tongue at him, for the cool remoteness of his tone. It would serve him right to ride on and let him break his neck over the bluff if he wanted to. She shut her teeth together and turned her face away from him.

So, in silence and with no very good feeling between them, they went precariously down the steep hill (the hill up which Marthy and the oxen and Jase had toiled so laboriously, twenty-seven years before) and across the tiny flat to where the cabin window winked a welcome at them through the storm.

CHAPTER III
A BOOK, A BANNOCK, AND A BED

Blue led the way straight to the low, dirt-roofed stable of logs and stopped with his nose against the closed door. Billy Louise herself was deceived by the whirl of snow and would have missed the stable entirely if the leadership had been hers. She patted Blue gratefully on the shoulder when she unsaddled him. She groped with her fingers for the wooden peg in the wall where the saddle should hang, failed to find it, and so laid the saddle down against the logs and covered it with the blanket.

"Just turn your horse in loose," she directed the man shortly. "Blue won't fight, and I think the rest of the horses are in the other part. And come on to the house."

It pleased her a little to see that he obeyed her without protest; but she was not so pleased at his silence, and she led the way rather indignantly toward the winking eye which was the cabin's window.

At the sound of their feet on the wide doorstep, her mother pulled open the door and stood fair in the light, looking out with the anxious look which had lived so long in her face that it had lines of its own chiseled deep in her forehead and at the sides of her mouth.

"Is that you, Billy Louise? Oh, ain't Peter Howling Dog with

you? What makes you so terrible late, Billy Louise? Come right in, stranger. I don't know your name, but I don't need to know it. A storm like this is all the interduction a fellow needs, I guess." She smiled, at that. She had a nice smile, with a little resemblance to Billy Louise, except that the worried, inquiring look never left her eyes; as if she had once waited long for bad news, and had met everyone with anxious, eager questioning, and her eyes had never changed afterwards. Billy Louise glanced at her with her calm, measuring look, making the contrast very sharp between the two.

"What about Peter?" she asked. "Isn't he here?"

"No, and he ain't been since an hour or so after you left. He saddled up and rode off down the river – to the reservation, I reckon."

"Then the chores aren't done, I suppose." Billy Louise went over and took a lantern down from its nail, turning up the wick so that she could light it with the candle. "Go up to the fire and thaw out," she invited the man. "We'll have supper in a few minutes."

Instead he reached out and took the lantern from her as soon as she had lighted it. "You go to the fire yourself," he said. "I'll do what's necessary outside."

"Why-y – " Billy Louise, her fingers still clinging to the lantern, looked up at him. He was staring down at her with that intent look she had objected to on the trail, but she saw his mouth, and the little smile that hid just back of his lips. She smiled back without knowing it. "I'll have to go along, anyway. There are cows

to milk and you couldn't very well find the cow-stable alone."

"Think not?"

Billy Louise had been perfectly furious at that tone, out on the trail. Now that she could see his lips and their little twitching to keep back the smile, she did not mind the tone at all. She had turned away to get the milk pails, and now she gave him a sidelong look, of the kind that had been utterly wasted upon Marthy. The man met it and immediately turned his attention to the lantern wick, which needed nice adjustment before its blaze quite pleased him; he was not a Marthy to receive such a look unmoved.

Together they went out again into the storm they had left so eagerly. Billy Louise showed him where was the pitchfork and the hay, and then did the milking while he piled full the mangers. After that they went together and turned the shivering work horses into the stable from the corral where they huddled, rumps to the storm; and the man lifted great forkfuls of hay and carried it into their stalls, while Billy Louise held the lantern high over her head like a western Liberty. They did not talk much, except when there was need for speech; but they were beginning to feel a little glow of companionship by the time they were ready to fight their way against the blizzard to the house, Billy Louise going before with the lantern, while the man followed close behind, carrying the two pails of milk that was already freezing in little crystals to the tin.

"Did you get everything done? You must be half froze – and

starved into the bargin." Mrs. MacDonald, as is the way of some women who know the weight of isolation, had a habit of talking with a nervous haste at times, and of relapsing into long, brooding silences afterwards. She talked now, while she pulled a pan of hot, brown biscuits from the oven, poured the tea, and turned crisp, browned potatoes out of a frying-pan into a deep, white bowl. She wondered, over and over, why Peter Howling Dog had left and why he did not return. She said that was the way, when you depended on Indians for anything. She did wish there was a white man to be had. She asked after Marthy and Jase and gave Billy Louise no opportunity to tell her anything.

Billy Louise glanced often at the man, who did not look in the least as she had fancied, except that he really did have a high nose and terribly keen eyes with something behind the keenness that baffled her. And his mouth was pleasant, especially when that smile hid just behind his lips; also, she liked his hair, which was thick and brown, with hints of red in it here and there, and a strong inclination to curl where it was longest. She had known he was tall when he stepped into the light of the door; now she saw that he was slim to the point of leanness, with square shoulders and a nervous quickness when he moved. His fingers were never idle; when he was not eating, he rolled bits of biscuit into tiny, soggy balls beside his plate, or played a soft tattoo with his fork.

"I didn't quite catch your name, mister," her mother said finally. "But take another biscuit, anyway."

"Warren is my name," returned the man, with that hidden

smile because she had never before given him any opportunity to tell it. "Ward Warren. I've got a claim over on Mill Creek."

Billy Louise gave a little gasp and distractedly poured two spoons of sugar in her tea, although she hated it sweetened.

I've got to tell you why, even at the price of digression. Long ago, when Billy Louise was twelve or so, and lived largely in a dream world of her own with Minervy for her "pretend" playmate, she had one day chanced upon a paragraph in a paper that had come from town wrapped around a package of matches. It was all about Ward Warren. The name caught her fancy, and the text of the paragraph seized upon her imagination. Until school filled her mind with other things, she had built adventures without end in which Ward Warren was the central figure. Up the canyon at the caves, she sometimes pretended that Ward Warren had abducted Minervy and that she must lead the rescue. Sometimes, when she rode in the hills, Ward Warren abducted her and led her into strange places where she tried to shiver in honest dread. Often and often, however, Ward Warren was a fugitive who came to her for help; then she would take him to Minervy's cave and hide him, perhaps; or she would mount her horse and lead him, by devious ways, to safety, and upon some hilltop from which she could point out the route he must follow, she would bid him a touching adieu and beseech him, in the impossible language of some old romancer, to go and lead a blameless life. Sitting there at the table opposite him, stirring the sugar heedlessly into her tea, one favorite exhortation returned

from her dream-world, clear as if she had just spoken it aloud. "Go, and sin no more; and if perchance you will in some distant far land send me a kind thought, that will be reward enough for what I have done this day. Farewell, Ward Warren – Kismet."

The lips of Billy Louise smiled and stopped just short of laughter, and she looked across at Ward Warren as if she expected him to laugh also at that frightfully virtuous though stilted adieu. She found him looking straight at her in that intent fashion that seemed as if he would see through and all around her and her thoughts. He was not smiling at all. His mouth was pulled into a certain bitter understanding; indeed, he looked exactly as if Billy Louise had dealt him a deliberate affront which he could neither parry nor fling back at her, but must endure with what stoicism he might.

Billy Louise blushed guiltily, took an unpremeditated swallow of tea, and grimaced over the sickish sweetness of it. She got up and emptied the tea into the slop bucket, and loitered over the refilling of the cup so that when she returned to the table she was at least outwardly calm. She felt another quick, keen glance from across the table, but she helped herself composedly to the cream and listened to her mother with flattering attention.

"Jase has got all-gone feelings now, mommie," she remarked irrelevantly during a brief pause and relapsed into silence again. She knew that was good for at least five minutes of straight monologue, with her mother in that talking mood. She finished her supper while Warren listened abstractedly to a complete

biography of the Meilkes and learned all about Marthy's energy and Jase's shiftlessness.

"Ward Warren!" Billy Louise was saying to herself. "Did you ever in your life – it's exactly as if Minervy should come to life and walk in. Ward Warren! There couldn't possibly be two Ward Warrens; it's such an odd name. Well!"

Then she went mentally over that paragraph. She wished she did not remember every single word of it, but she did. And she was afraid to look at him after that. And she wanted to, dreadfully. She felt as though he belonged to her. Why, he was her old playmate! And she had saved his life hundreds of times, at immense risks to herself; and he had always been her devoted slave afterwards, and never failed to appear at the precise moment when she was beset by Indians or robbers or something, and in dire need. The blood he had shed in her behalf! At that point Billy Louise startled herself and the others by suddenly laughing out loud at the memory of one time when Ward Warren had killed enough Indians to fill a deep washout so that he might carry her across to the other side!

"Is there anything funny about Jase Meilke dying, Billy Louise?" her mother asked her in a perfectly shocked tone.

"No – I was thinking of something else." She glanced at the man eyeing her so distrustfully from across the table and gurgled again. It was terribly silly, but she simply could not help seeing Ward Warren calmly filling that washout with dead Indians so that he might carry her across it in his arms. The more she tried

to forget that, the funnier it became. She ended by leaving the table and retiring precipitately to her own tiny room in the lean-to where she buried her face as deep as it would go in a puffy pillow of wild duck feathers.

He, poor devil, could not be expected to know just what had amused her so; he did know that it somehow concerned himself, however. He took up his position – mentally – behind the wall of aloofness which stood between himself and an unfriendly world, and when Billy Louise came out later to help with the dishes, he was sitting absorbed in a book.

Billy Louise got out her algebra and a slate and began to ponder the problem of a much-handicapped goat's feeding-ground. Ward Warren read and read and read and never looked up from the pages. Never in her life had she seen a man read as he read; hungrily, as a starved man eats; rapidly, his eyes traveling like a shuttle across the page; down, down – flip a leaf quickly and let the shuttle-glance go on. Billy Louise let her slate, with the goat problem unsolved, lie in her lap while she watched him. When she finally became curious enough to decipher the name of the book – she had three or four in that dull, brown binding – and saw that he was reading *The Ring and the Book*, she felt stunned. She read Browning just as she drank sage tea; it was supposed to be good for her. Her English teacher had given her that book. She never would have believed that any living human could read it as Ward Warren was reading it now; avidly, absorbedly, lost to his surroundings – to her own presence, if

you please! Billy Louise glanced at her mother. That lady, having discovered that her guest's gloves needed mending, was working over them with pieces of Indian-tanned buckskin and beeswaxed thread, the picture of domestic content.

Billy Louise sighed. She shifted her chair. She got up and put a heavy chunk of wood on the fire and glanced over her shoulder at the man to see if he were going to take the hint and offer to help. She came back and stood close to him while she selected, with great deliberation, a book from the shelf beside his head. And Ward Warren, perfectly normal and not over twenty-five or so, pushed his chair out of her way with a purely mechanical movement, and read and read, and actually was too absorbed to feel her nearness. And he really was reading *The Ring and the Book*; Billy Louise was rude enough to look over his shoulder to make sure of that. She gave up, then, and though she picked a book at random from the shelf, she did not attempt to read it. She went to her room and made it ready for their guest, and after that she went to bed in her mother's room; and she thought and thought and did a lot of wondering about Life and about Ward Warren. She heard him go to bed, after a long while, and she wondered if he had finished the book first.

The next morning the blizzard raged so that he stayed as a matter of course. Peter Howling Dog had not returned, so Warren did the chores and would not let Billy Louise help with anything. He filled the wood-box, piled great chunks of wood by the fireplace, and saw that the water-pails were full to the

icy brims. He talked a little, and Billy Louise discovered that he was quick to see a joke, and that he simply could not be caught napping, but had always a retort ready for her. That was true until after dinner, when he picked up a book again. When that happened, he was dead to the world bounded by the coulee walls, and he did not show any symptoms of consciousness until he had reached the last page, just when the light was growing dim and blurring the lines so that he must hold the pages within six inches of his eyes. He closed the book with a long breath, placed it accurately upon the shelf where it had stood since Billy Louise came home from school, and picked up his hat and gloves. It was time to wade out through the snow and feed the stock and bring in more wood.

"I wish we could get him to stay all winter, instead of that Peter Howling Dog," Mrs. MacDonald said anxiously, after he had gone out. "I just know Peter's off drinking. I don't think he's a safe man to have around, Billy Louise. I didn't when you hired him. I haven't felt easy a minute with him on the place. I wish you'd hire Mr. Warren, Billy Louise. He's nice and quiet – "

"And he's got a ranch of his own. He doesn't strike me as a man who wants a job milking two cows and carrying slop to the pigs, mommie."

"Well, I'd feel a lot easier if we had him instead of that breed; only we ain't even got the breed, half the time. This is the third time he's disappeared, in the two months we've had him. I really think you ought to speak to Mr. Warren, Billy Louise."

"Speak to him yourself. You're the one that wants him," Billy Louise answered somewhat sharply. She adored her mother; but if she had to run the ranch, she did wish her mother would not interfere and give advice just at the wrong time.

"Well, you needn't be cross about it; you know yourself that Peter can't be depended on a minute. There he went off yesterday and never fed the pigs their noon slop, and I had to carry it out myself. And my lumbago has bothered me ever since, just like it was going to give me another spell. You can't be here all the time, Billy Louise – leastways you ain't; and Peter – "

"Oh, good gracious, mommie! I told you to hire the man if you want him. Only Ward Warren isn't – "

Ward Warren pushed open the door and looked from one to the other, his eyes two question marks. "Isn't – what?" he asked and shut the door behind him with the air of one who is ready for anything.

"Isn't the kind of man who wants to hire out to do chores," Billy Louise finished and looked at him straight. "Are you? Mommie wants to hire you."

"Oh. Well, I was just about to ask for the job, anyway." He laughed, and the distrust left his eyes. "As a matter of fact, I was going over to Jim Larson's to hang out for the rest of the winter and get away from the lonesomeness of the hills. The old Turk's a pretty good friend of mine. But it looks to me as if you two needed something around that looks like a man a heap more than Jim does. I know Peter Howling Dog to a fare-you-well; you'll

be all to the good if he forgets to come back. So if you'll stake me to a meal now and then, and a place to sleep, I'll be glad to see you through the winter – or until you get some white man to take my place." He took up the two water-pails and waited, glancing from one to the other with that repressed smile which Billy Louise was beginning to look for in his face.

Now that matters had approached the point of decision, her mother stood looking at her helplessly, waiting for her to speak. Billy Louise drew herself up primly and ended by contradicting the action. She gave him the sidelong glance which he was least prepared to withstand – though in justice to Billy Louise, she was absolutely unconscious of its general effectiveness – and twisted her lips whimsically.

"We'll stake you to a book, a bannock, and a bed if you want to stay, Mr. Warren," she said quite soberly. "Also to a pitchfork and an axe, if you like, and regular wages."

His eyes went to her and steadied there with the intent expression in them. "Thanks. Cut out the wages, and I'll take the offer just as it stands," he told her and pulled his hat farther down on his head. "She's going to be one stormy night, lay-dees," he added in quite another tone, on his way to the door. "Five o'clock by the town clock, and al-ll's well!" This last in still another tone, as he pushed out against the swooping wind and pulled the door shut with a slam. They heard him whistling a shrill, rollicking air on his way to the creek; at least, it sounded rollicking, the way he whistled it.

"That's *The Old Chisholm Trail* he's whistling," Billy Louise observed under her breath, smiling reminiscently. "The very song I used to pretend he always sang when he came down the canyon to rescue Minervy and me! But of course – I knew all the time he's a cowboy; it said so – "

The whistling broke and he began to sing at the top of a clear, strong-lunged voice, that old, old trail song beloved of punchers the West over:

> "Oh, it's cloudy in the West and a-lookin' like rain,
> And my damned old slicker's in the wagon again,
> Coma ti yi youpy, youpy-a, youpy-a,
> Coma ti yi youpy, youpy-a!"

"What did you say, Billy Louise? I'm sure it's a comfort to have him here, and you see he was glad and willing – "

But Billy Louise was holding the door open half an inch, listening and slipping back into the child-world wherein Ward Warren came singing down the canyon to rescue her and Minervy. The words came gustily from the creek down the slope:

> "No chaps, no slicker, and a-pourin' down rain,
> And I swear by the Lord I'll never night-herd again,
> Coma ti yi youpy, youpy-a, youpy-a,
> Coma ti yi youpy, youpy-a!
>
> "Feet in the stirrups and seat in the saddle,

I hung and rattled with them long-horn cattle,
Coma ti yi – "

"Do shut the door, Billy Louise! What you want to stand there like that for? And the wind freezing everything inside! I can feel a terrible draught on my feet and ankles, and you know what that leads to."

So Billy Louise closed the door and laid another alder root on the coals in the fireplace, the while her mind was given over to dreamy speculations, and the words of that old trail song ran on in her memory though she could no longer hear him singing. Her mother talked on about Peter and the storm and this man who had ridden straight from the land of daydreams to her door, but the girl was not listening.

"Now ain't you relieved, yourself, that he's going to stay?"

Billy Louise, kneeling on the hearth and staring abstractedly into the fire, came back with a jerk to reality. The little smile that had been in her eyes and on her lips fled back with the dreams that had brought it. She gave her shoulders an impatient twitch and got up.

"Oh – I guess he'll be more agreeable to have around than Peter," she admitted taciturnly; which was as close to her real opinion of the man as a mere mother might hope to come.

CHAPTER IV
"OLD DAME FORTUNE'S USED ME FOR A FOOTBALL"

Ward Warren sat before the fireplace with a cigarette long gone cold in his fingers and stared into the blaze until the blaze died to bright-glowing coals, and the coals filmed and shrank down into the bed of ashes. Billy Louise had spoken to him twice, and he had not answered. She had swept all around him, and he had shifted his feet out of her way, and later his chair, like a man in his sleep who turns from an unaccustomed light or draws the covers over shoulders growing chilled, without any real consciousness of what he does. Billy Louise put away the broom, hung the dustpan on its nail behind the door, and stood looking at Ward curiously and with some resentment; this was not the first time he had gone into fits of abstraction as deep as his absorption in the books he read so hungrily. He had been at the Wolverine a month, and they were pretty well acquainted by now and inclined to friendliness when Ward threw off his moodiness and his air of holding himself ready for some affront which he seemed to expect. But for all that the distrust never quite left his eyes, and there were times like this when he was absolutely oblivious to her presence.

Billy Louise suddenly lost patience. She stooped and picked

up a bit of bark the size of her thumb and threw it at Ward, with a little, vexed twist of her lips. She had a fine accuracy of aim – she hit him on the nape of the neck, just where his hair came down in a queer little curly "cow-lick" in the middle.

Ward jumped up and whirled, and when he faced Billy Louise he had a gun gripped in the fingers that had held the cigarette so loosely. In his eyes was the glare which a man turns upon his deadliest enemy, perhaps, but seldom indeed upon a girl. So they faced each other, while Billy Louise backed against the wall and took two sharp breaths.

Ward relaxed; a shamed flush reddened his whole face. He shoved the gun back inside the belt of his trousers – Billy Louise had never dreamed that he carried any weapon save his haughty aloofness of manner – and with a little snort of self-disgust dropped back into the chair. He did not stare again into the fire, however; he folded his arms upon the high chairback and laid his face down upon them, like a woman who is hurt to the point of tears and yet will not weep. His booted feet were thrust toward the dying coals, his whole attitude spoke of utter desolation – of a loneliness beyond words.

Billy Louise set her teeth hard together to keep back the tears of sympathy. Suffering of any sort always wrung the tender heart of her. But suffering like this – never in her life had she seen anything like it. She had seen her father angry, discouraged, morose. She had seen men fight. She had soothed her mother's grief, which expressed itself in tears and lamentations. But this

hidden hurt, this stoical suffering that she had seen often and often in Ward's eyes and that sent his head down now upon his arms – She went to him and laid her two hands on his shoulders without even thinking that this was the first time she had ever touched him.

"Don't!" she said, half whispering so that she would not waken her mother, in bed with an attack of lumbago. "I – I didn't know. Ward, listen to me! Whatever it is, can't you tell me? You – I'm your friend. Don't look as if you – you hadn't a friend on earth!"

Still he did not move or give any sign that he heard. Billy Louise had no thought of coquetry. Her heart ached with pity and a longing to help him. She slid one hand up and pinched his ear, just as she would playfully tweak the ear of a child.

"Ward, you mustn't. I've seen you think and think and look as if you hadn't a friend on earth. You mustn't. I suppose you've got lots of friends who'd stand by you through anything. Anyway, you've got me, and – I understand all about it." She whispered those last words, and her heart thumped heavily with trepidation after she had spoken.

Ward raised his head, caught one of her hands and held it fast while he looked deep into her eyes. He was searching, questioning, measuring, and he was doing it without uttering a word. The plummet dropped straight into the clear, sweet depths of her soul. If it did not reach the bottom, he was satisfied with the soundings he took. He drew a deep breath and gave her hand a little squeeze and let it go.

"Did I scare you? I'm sorry," he said, speaking in a hushed tone because of the woman in the next room. "I was thinking about a man I may meet some day; and if I do meet him, the chances are I'll kill him. I – didn't – I forgot where I was – " He threw out a hand in a gesture that amply completed explanation and apology and fumbled in his pocket for tobacco and papers. Abstractedly he began the making of a cigarette.

Billy Louise put wood on the fire, pulled up a square, calico-padded stool, and sat down. She waited, and she had the wisdom to wait in complete silence.

Ward leaned forward with a twig in his hand, got it ablaze, and lighted his cigarette. He did not look at Billy Louise until he had taken a whiff or two. Then he stared at her for a full minute, and ended by flipping the charred twig playfully into her lap, and laughing a little because she jumped.

"What made you catch your breath when I told my name that night I came?" he asked quizzically, but with a tensity behind the lightness of his tone and behind the little smile in his eyes as well. "Where had you ever heard of me before?"

Billy Louise gasped again, sent a lightning-thought into the future, and answered more casually than she had hoped she could.

"When I was a kid I ran across the name – somewhere – and I used it to play with – "

"Yes?"

"You know – I was always making believe different things. I

never had anyone to play with in my life, so I had a pretend-girl, named Minervy. And I had you. I used to have you rescue us from Indians and things, but mostly you were a road-agent or a robber, and when you weren't holding me or Minervy for ransom, I was generally leading you over some most ungodly trails, saving you from posses and things. I used," said Billy Louise, forcing a laugh, "to have some wild old times with you, believe me! So when you told your name, why – it was just like – you know; it was exactly like having a doll come to life!"

He eyed her fixedly until she tingled with nervousness.

"Yes – and what about – understanding all about it? Do you?" He drew in his under lip, let it go, and drew it again between his teeth, while he frowned at her thoughtfully. "Do you understand all about it?" he insisted, leaning toward her and never once taking that boring gaze from her face.

"I – well, I – do – some of it anyway." Billy Louise lifted a hand spasmodically to her throat. This was digging deeper into the agonies of life than she had ever gone before. "What was in the paper," she whispered later, as if his eyes were drawing it from her by force.

"What was that? What did it say?"

"I – I – what difference does it make, what it said?" Billy Louise turned imploring eyes upon him. Her breath was coming fast and uneven. "It doesn't matter – to me – in the least. It – didn't say much. I – can't tell exactly – " She was growing white around the mouth. The horror of being compelled to say, out

loud – and to him!

"I didn't know there was a woman in the world like you," Ward said irrelevantly and looked into the fire. "I thought women were just soft things a man had to take care of and carry along through life, a dead weight when they weren't worse. I never knew a woman could be a friend – the kind of friend a man can be." He threw his cigarette into the fire and watched the paper shrivel swiftly and the tobacco turn into a thin, blue smoke-spiral.

"Life's a queer thing," he said, taking a different angle. "I started out with big notions about the things I'd do. Maybe I started wrong, but for a kid with nobody to point the trail for him, I don't think I did so worse – till old Dame Fortune spotted me in the crowd and proceeded to use me for a football." He leaned an elbow on one knee and stared hard at a burning brand that was getting ready to fall and send up a stream of sparks. Then he turned his head quite unexpectedly and looked at Billy Louise. "What was it you read?" he asked abruptly.

"I – don't like to – say it," she whispered unsteadily.

"Well, you needn't. I'll say it for you, when I come to it. There's a lot before that."

Ward Warren had never before opened his soul to any human; not completely. Perhaps, sitting that evening in the deepening dusk, with the firelight lighting swiftly the brooding face of the girl and afterward veiling it softly with shadows, perhaps even then there were desolate places in his life which his words did not touch. But so much as a man may put into words, Ward told

her; more, a great deal more, than he would ever tell to any other woman as long as he lived. More perhaps than he would ever tell to any man. And in it all there was no word of love. It was of what lay behind him that he talked. The low, even murmur of his voice was broken by long, brooding silences, when the two stared into the shifting flames and saw there the things his words had conjured. Sometimes the eyes of Billy Louise were soft with sympathy. Sometimes they were wide and held the light of horror. Once, with a small sob that had no tears, she reached out and clutched his arm. "Oh, don't!" she gasped. "Don't go on telling – I – I can't bear to listen to that!"

"It isn't nice for a woman to listen to, I guess," Ward gritted. "I know it was hell to stand, but – " He was silent so long after that, and his eyes grew so intent and so somber while he stared, that Billy Louise pulled at his sleeve to recall him.

"Skip that part and tell me – "

Ward took up the story and told her much; more than she had ever dreamed could be. I can't repeat any of it; what he said was for Billy Louise to know and none other.

It was late when she finally rose from the stool and lighted the lamp because her mother woke and called to her. Ward went out to turn the horses into the stable and fasten the door. He should have sheltered them two hours before. Billy Louise should long ago have made tea and toast for her mother, for that matter. But when life's big, bitter problems confront one, little things are usually forgotten.

They came back to everyday realities, though the spell which Ward's impulsive unburdening had woven still wrapped them in that close companionship of complete understanding. They played checkers for an hour or so and then went to bed. Billy Louise lay in a waking nightmare because of all the hard things she had heard about life. Ward stared up into the dark and could not lose himself in sleep, because he had opened the door upon the evil places in his memory and let out all the trooping devils that lived there.

After that, though there was never any word of love between them, Billy Louise, with the sure instinct of a woman innately pure, watched unobtrusively for signs of those fits of bitter brooding; watched and drove them off with various weapons of her own. Sometimes she cheerfully declared that she was bored to death, and wasn't Ward just dying for a game of "rob casino"? Sometimes she simply teased him into retaliation. Frequently she insisted that he repeat the things he had learned by heart, of poetry or humorous prose, for his memory was almost uncanny in its tenacity. She discovered quite early, and by accident, that she had only to shake her head in a certain way and declaim: "Ah, Tam, noo, Tam, thou'lt get thy faring – In hell they'll roast thee like a herring," – she had only to say that to make him laugh and repeat the whole of *Tam O'Shanter's Ride* with a perfectly devilish zest for poor Tam's misfortunes, and an accent which made her suspect who were his ancestors.

Billy Louise meant only to wean him from his bitterness

against Life, and to convince him, by a somewhat roundabout method since at heart she was scared to death of his aloofness, that he was not "old lady Fortune's football" as he sometimes pessimistically declared. At thirteen she had mixed him with her dreams and led him by difficult trails to safety from the imaginary enemies that pursued him. At nineteen she unconsciously mixed him with her life and led him – more surely than in her dreams, and by a far more difficult trail, had she only known it – safe away from the devils of memory and a distrust of life that pursued him more relentlessly than any human foe.

She only meant to wean him from pessimism and rebuild within him a healthy appetite for life. If she did more than that, she did not know it then; for Ward Warren had learned, along with other hard lessons, the art of keeping his thoughts locked safely away, and of using his face as a mask to hide even the doorway to his real self. Only his eyes turned traitors sometimes when he looked at Billy Louise; though she, being a somewhat self-centered young person, never quite read what they tried to betray.

She took him up the canyon and showed him her cave and Minervy's. And she had the doubtful satisfaction of seeing him doubled over the saddle-horn in a paroxysm of laughter when she led him to the historical washout and recounted the feat of the dead Indians with which he had made a safe passing for her.

"Well, they did it in history," she defended at last, her cheeks redder than was perfectly normal. "I read about it – at Waterloo

when the Duke of Wellington – wasn't it? You needn't laugh as if it couldn't be done. It was that sunken-road business put it into my head in the first place; and I think you ought to feel flattered."

"I do," gasped Ward, wiping his eyes. "Say, I was some bandit, wasn't I, William Louisa?"

Billy Louise looked at him sidewise. "No, you weren't any bandit at all – then. You were a kind scout, that time. I was here, all surrounded by Indians and saying the Lord's prayer with my hair all down my back like mommie's Rock of Ages picture – will you shut up laughing? – and you came riding up that draw over there on a big, black horse named Sultan (You needn't snort; I still think Sultan's a dandy name for a horse!). And you hollered to me to get behind that rock, over there. And I quit at 'Forgive us our debts' – daddy always had so many! – and hiked for the rock. And you commenced shooting – Oh, I'm not going to tell you a single other pretend!" She sulked then, which was quite as diverting as the most hair-raising "pretend" she had ever told him and held Ward's attention unflaggingly until they were half way home.

"Sing the *Chisholm Trail*," she commanded, when her temper was sunshiny again. This had been a particularly moody day for Ward, and Billy Louise felt that extra effort was required to rout the memory-devils. "Daddy knew a little of it, and old Jake Summers used to sing more, but I never did hear it all."

"Ladies don't, as a general thing," Ward replied, biting his lips.

"Why? I know there's about forty verses, and some of them

are kind of sweary ones; but go ahead and sing it. I don't mind damn now and then."

This sublime innocence was also diverting, even to a man haunted by the devils of memory. Ward's lips twitched, and a flush warmed his cheek-bones at the mere thought of singing it all in her presence. "I'll sing all of *Sam Bass*, if you like," he temporized, with a grin.

"Oh, I hate *Sam Bass*! We had a Dutchman working for us when I was just a kid, and he was forever bawling out: 'Sa-am Pass was porn in Injiany, it was-s hiss natiff ho-o-ome!'"

Billy Louise was a pretty good mimic. She had Ward doubled over the horn again and shouting so that the canyon walls roared echoes for three full minutes. "I've always wanted to hear the *Chisholm Trail*. I know how it was sung from Mexico north on the old cattle-trails, and how every ambitious puncher who had enough imagination and could make a rhyme, added a verse or so, till it's really a – a classic of the cow-camps."

"Ye-es – it sure is all that." Ward eyed her furtively.

"And with that memory of yours, I simply know that you can sing every single word of it," Billy Louise went on pitilessly – and innocently. "You're a cowpuncher yourself, and you must have heard it all, at one time and another; and I don't believe you ever forgot a thing in your life." She caught her breath there, conscience-stricken, and added hastily and imperiously, "So go on – begin at the beginning and sing it all. I'll keep tab and see if you sing forty verses." And she prompted coaxingly:

"Come along, boys, and listen to my tale,
I'll tell you of my troubles on the old Chisholm trail,
Coma ti yi – "

and nodded her head approvingly when Ward took up the ditty where she left off and sang it with the rollicking enthusiasm which only a man who has soothed restless cattle on a stormy night can put into the doggerel.

He did not sing the whole forty verses, for good and sufficient reasons best known to punchers themselves. But, with swift, shamed skipping of certain lines and some hasty revisions, he actually did sing thirty, and Billy Louise was so engrossed that she forgot to count them and never suspected the omissions; for some of the verses were quite "sweary" enough to account for his hesitation.

The singing of those thirty verses brought a reminiscent mood upon the singer. For the rest of the way, which they rode at a walk, Ward sat very much upon one side of the saddle, with his body facing Billy Louise and his foot dangling free of the stirrup, and told her tales of trail-herds, and the cow-camps, and of funny things that had happened on the range. His "I remember one time" opened the door to a more fascinating world than Billy Louise's dream-world, because this other world was real.

So, from pure accident, she hit upon the most effective of all weapons with which to fight the memory-devils. She led Ward to remembering the pleasanter parts of his past life and to telling

her of them.

When spring came at last, and he rode regretfully back to his claim on Mill Greek, he was not at all the morose Ward Warren who had ridden down to the Wolverine that stormy night in January. The distrust had left his eyes, and that guarded remoteness was gone from his manner. He thought and he planned as other men thought and planned, and looked into the future eagerly, and dreamed dreams of his own; dreams that brought the hidden smile often to his lips and his eyes.

Still, the thing those dreams were built upon was yet locked tight in his heart, and not even Billy Louise, whose instinct was so keen and so sure in all things else, knew anything of them or of the bright-hued hope they were built upon. Fortune's football was making ready to fight desperately to become captain of the game, that he might be something more to Billy Louise.

CHAPTER V
MARTHY BURIES HER DEAD AND GREETS HER NEPHEW

Jase did not move or give his customary, querulous grunt when Marthy nudged him at daylight, one morning in mid-April. Marthy gave another poke with her elbow and lay still, numbed by a sudden dread. She moved cautiously out of the bed and half across the cramped room before she turned her head toward him. Then she stood still and looked and looked, her hard face growing each moment more pinched and stony and gray.

Jase had died while the coyotes were yapping their dawn-song up on the rim of the Cove. He lay rigid under the coarse, gray blanket, the flesh of his face drawn close to the bones, his skimpy, gray beard tilted upward.

Marthy's jaw set into a harsher outline than ever. She dressed with slow, heavy movements and went out and fed the stock. In stolid calm she did the milking and turned out the cows into the pasture. She gathered an apron full of chips and started a fire, just as she had done every morning for twenty-nine years, and she put the coffee-pot on the greasy stove and boiled the brew of yesterday – which was also her habit.

She sat for some time with her head leaning upon her grimy hand and stared unseeingly out upon a peach-tree in full bloom,

and at a pair of busy robins who had chosen a convenient crotch for their nest. Finally she rose stiffly, as if she had grown older within the last hour, and went outside to the place where she had been mending the irrigating ditch the day before; she knocked the wet sand off the shovel she had left sticking in the soft bank and went out of the yard and up the slope toward the rock wall.

On a tiny, level place above the main ditch and just under the wall, Marthy began to dig, setting her broad, flat foot uncompromisingly upon the shoulder of the shovel and sending it deep into the yellow soil. She worked slowly and methodically and steadily, just as she did everything else. When she had dug down as deep as she could and still manage to climb out, and had the hole wide enough and long enough, she got awkwardly to the grassy surface and sat for a long while upon a rock, staring dumbly at the gaunt, brown hills across the river.

She returned to the cabin at last, and with the manner of one who dreads doing what must be done, she went in where Jase lay stiff and cold under the blankets.

Early that afternoon, Marthy went staggering up the slope, wheeling Jase's body before her on the creaky, home-made wheelbarrow. In the same harsh, primitive manner in which they both had lived, Marthy buried her dead. And though in life she had given him few words save in command or upbraiding, with never a hint of love to sweeten the days for either, yet she went whimpering away from that grave. She broke off three branches of precious peach blossoms and carried them up the slope. She

stuck them upright in the lumpy soil over Jase's head and stood there a long while with tear-streaked face, staring down at the grave and at the nodding pink blossoms.

Billy Louise rode singing down the rocky trail through the deep, narrow gorge, to where the hawthorn and choke-cherries hid the opening to the cove. Just on the edge of the thickest fringe, she pulled up and broke off tender branches of cherry bloom, then went on, still singing softly to herself because the air was sweet with spring odors, the sunshine lay a fresh yellow upon the land, and because the joy of life was in her blood and, like the birds, she had no other means of expression at hand. Blue's feet sank to the fetlocks in the rich, black soil of the little meadow that lay smooth to the tumbling sweep of the river behind its own little willow fringe. His ears perked forward, his eyes rolling watchfully for strange sights and sounds, he stepped softly forward, ready to wheel at the slightest alarm and gallop back up the gorge to more familiar ground. It was long since Billy Louise had turned his head down the rocky trail, and Blue liked little the gloom of the gorge and the sudden change to soft, black soil that stopped just short of being boggy in the wet places. Where the trail led into a marshy crossing of the big, irrigating ditch that brought the stream from far up the gorge to water meadow and orchard, Blue halted and cast a look of disapproval back at his rider. Billy Louise stopped singing and laughed at him.

"I guess you can go where a cow can go, you silly thing. Mud's

a heap easier than lava rock, if you only knew it, Blue. Get along with you."

Blue lowered his head, snuffed suspiciously at the water-filled tracks, and would have turned back. Mud he despised instinctively, since he had nearly mired on the creek bank when he was a sucking colt.

"Blue! Get across that ditch, or I'll beat you to death!" The voice of Billy Louise was soft with a caressing note at the end, so that the threat did not sound very savage, after all. She sniffed at the branch of cherry blossoms and reined the horse back to face the ditch. And Blue, who had a will of his own, snorted and wheeled, this time in frank rebellion against her command.

"Oh, will you? Well, you'll cross that ditch, you know, sooner or later – so you might just as well – " Blue reared and whirled again, plunging two rods back toward the cherry thicket.

Billy Louise set her teeth against her lower lip, slid her rawhide quirt from slim wrist to firm hand-grip, and proceeded to match Blue's obstinacy with her own; and since the obstinacy of Billy Louise was stronger and finer and backed by a surer understanding of the thing she was fighting against, Blue presently lifted himself, leaped the ditch in one clean jump, and snorted when he sank nearly to his knees in the soft, black soil beyond.

From there to the pink drift of peach bloom against the dull brown of the bluff, Blue galloped angrily, leaving deep, black prints in the soft green of the meadow. So they came headlong

upon Marthy, just as she was knocking the yellow clay of the grave from her irrigating shovel against the pole fence of her pig-pen.

"Why, Marthy!" Once before in her life Billy Louise had seen Marthy's chin quivering like that, and big, slow tears sliding down the network of lines on Marthy's leathery cheeks. With a painful slump her spirits went heavy with her sympathy. "Marthy!"

She knew without a word of explanation just what had happened. From Marthy's bent shoulders she knew, and from her tear-stained face, and from the yellow soil clinging still to the shovel in her hand. The wide eyes of Billy Louise sent seeking glances up the slope where the soil was yellow; went to the long, raw ridge under the wall, with the peach blossoms standing pitifully awry upon the western end. Her eyes filled with tears. "Oh, Marthy! When was it?"

"In the night, sometime, I guess." Marthy's voice had a harsh huskiness. "He was – gone – when I woke up. Well – he's better off than I be. I dunno what woulda become of him if I'd went first." There, at last, was a note of tenderness, stifled though it was and fleeting. "Git down, Billy Louise, and come in. I been kinda lookin' for yuh to come, ever sence the weather opened up. How's your maw?"

Spoken sympathy was absolutely impossible in the face of that stoical acceptance of life's harsh law. Marthy turned toward the gate, taking the shovel and the wheelbarrow in with her. Billy Louise glanced furtively at the raw, yellow ridge under the rock

wall and rode on to the stable. She pulled off the saddle and bridle and turned Blue into the corral before she went slowly – and somewhat reluctantly – to the cabin, squat, old, and unkempt like its mistress, but buried deep in the renewed sweetness of bloom-time.

"The fruit's comin' on early this year," said Marthy from the doorway, her hands on her hips. "They's goin' to be lots of it, too, if we don't git a killin' frost." So she closed the conversational door upon her sorrow and pointed the way to trivial, every-day things.

"What are you going to do now, Marthy?" Billy Louise was perfectly capable of opening a conversational door, even when it had been closed decisively in her face. "You can't get on here alone, you know. Did you send for that nephew? If you haven't, you must hire somebody till – "

"He's comin'. That letter you sent over last month was from him. I dunno when he'll git here; he's liable to come most any time. I ain't going to hire nobody. I kin git along alone. I might as well of been alone – " Even harsh Marthy hesitated and did not finish the sentence that would have put a slight upon her dead.

"I'll stay to-night, anyway," said Billy Louise. "Just a week ago I hired John Pringle and that little breed wife of his for the summer. I couldn't afford it," she added, with a small sigh, "but Ward had to go back to his claim, and mommie needs someone in the house. She hasn't been a bit well, all winter. And I've turned all the stock out for the summer and have to do a lot of riding

on them; it's that or let them scatter all over the country and then have to hire a rep for every round-up. I can't afford that, I haven't got cattle enough to pay; and I like to ride, anyway. I've got them pretty well located along the creek, up at the head of the canyons. The grass is coming on fine, so they don't stray much. Are you going to turn your cattle out, Marthy? I see you haven't yet."

"No, I ain't yit. I dunno. I was going to sell 'em down to jest what the pasture'll keep. I'm gittin' too old to look after 'em. But I dunno – When Charlie gits here, mebby – "

"Oh, is that the nephew? I didn't know his name." Billy Louise was talking aimlessly to keep her thoughts away from the pitifulness of the sordid little tragedy in this beauty-spot and to drive that blank, apathetic look from Marthy's hard eyes.

"Charlie Fox, his name is. I hope he turns out a good worker. I've never had a chance to git ahead any; but if Charlie'll jest take holt, I'll mebby git some comfort outa life yit."

"He ought, to, I'm sure. And everyone thinks you've done awfully well, Marthy. What can I do now? Wash the dishes and straighten things up, I guess."

"You needn't do nothin' you ain't a mind to do, Billy Louise. I don't want you to think you got to slop around washin' my dirty dishes. I'm goin' on down into the medder and work on a ditch I'm puttin' in. You jest do what you're a mind to." She picked up the shovel and went off down the jungly path, herself the ugliest object in the Cove, where she had created so much beauty.

Again the sympathetic soul of Billy Louise had betrayed her

into performing an extremely disagreeable task. Shudderingly she looked into the unpleasant bedroom, and comprehending all of the sordidness of the tragedy, spent half an hour with her teeth set hard together while she dragged out dingy blankets and hung them over the fence under a voluptuous plum-tree. The next hour was so disagreeably employed that she wondered afterward how even her sympathy could have driven her to the things she did. She carried more water, after she had scrubbed that bedroom, and opened the window with the aid of the hammer, and set the tea-kettle on to heat the dish-water. Then, because her mind was full of poor, dead Jase, she took the branches of wild cherry and hawthorn blossoms she had gathered coming down the gorge and went up the slope to lay them on his grave.

She sat down on the rock where Marthy had rested after digging the grave, and with her chin in her two cupped palms, stared out across the river at the heaped bluffs and down at the pink-and-white patch of fruit-trees. She was trying, as the young will always try, to solve the riddle of life; and she was baffled and unhappy because she could not find any answer at all that pleased both her ideals and her reason. And then she heard a man's voice lifted up in riotous song, and she turned her head toward the opening of the gorge and listened, her eyes brightening while she waited.

"Foot in the stirrup and hand on the horn,
Best damn cowboy ever was born,

Coma ti yi youpy, youpy-a, youpy-a,
Coma ti yi youpy, youpy-a!"

Billy Louise, with her chin still in her palms, smiled and hummed the tune under her breath; that shows how quickly we throw off the burdens of our neighbors. "Wonder what he's doing down here?" she asked herself, and smiled again.

"I'll sell my outfit soon as I can,
I won't punch cattle for no damn' man,
Coma ti yi youpy, youpy-a, youpy-a,
Coma ti yi youpy, youpy-a!

"I'm goin' back to town to draw my money,
I'm going back to town to see my honey,
Coma ti yi – "

Ward came into sight through the little meadow, riding slowly, with both hands clasped over the horn of the saddle, his hat tilted back on his head, and his whole attitude one of absolute content with life. He saw Billy Louise almost as soon as she glimpsed him – and she had been watching that bit of road quite closely. He flipped the reins to one side and turned from the trail to ride straight up the slope to where she was.

Billy Louise, with a self-reproachful glance at the grave, ran down the slope to meet him – an unexpected welcome which made Ward's heart leap in his chest.

"Oh, Ward, for heaven's sake don't be singing that come-all-ye at the top of your voice, like that. Don't you – "

"Now I was given to understand that you liked that same come-all-ye. Have you been educating your musical taste in the last week, Miss William Louisa?" Ward stopped his horse before her, and with his hands still clasped over the saddle-horn, looked down at her with that hidden smile – and something else.

"No, I haven't. I don't have to educate myself to the point where I know the *Chisholm Trail* isn't a proper kind of funeral hymn, Ward Warren." Billy Louise glanced over her shoulder and lowered her voice instinctively, as we all do when death has come close and stopped. "Jase died last night; that's his grave up there. Isn't it perfectly pitiful? Poor old Marthy was here all solitary alone with him. And – Ward! She dug that grave her own self, and took him up and buried him – and, Ward! She – she wheeled him up in the —*wheelbarrow*! She had to, of course. She couldn't carry him. But isn't it awful?" Her hands were up, patting and smoothing the neck of his horse, and her face was bent to hide the tears that stood in her eyes, and the quiver of her mouth.

Ward drew in his lip, bit it, and let it go. He was a man, and he had seen much of tragedy and trouble; also, he did not know Marthy or Jase. His chief emotion was one of resentment against anything that brought tears to Billy Louise; she had not hidden them from him; they were the first and most important element in that day's happenings, so far as he was concerned. He leaned

and flipped the end of his reins lightly down on her bare head.

"William Louisa, if you cry about it, I'll – do something shocking, most likely. Yes, it's awful; a whole lot of life is awful. But it's done, and Mrs. Martha appears to be a woman with a whole lot of grit, so the chances are she'll carry her load like a man. She'll be horribly lonesome, down here! They lived alone, didn't they?"

"Yes, and they didn't seem to love each other much." Billy Louise was not one to gloss over hard facts, even in the face of that grave. "Marthy was always kicking about him, and he about her. But all the same they belonged together; they had lived together more years than we are old. And she's going to miss him awfully."

Several minutes they stood there, talking, while Billy Louise patted the horse absently, and Ward looked down at her and did not miss one little light or shadow in her face. He had been alone a whole week, thinking of her, remember, and his eyes were hungry to the point of starvation.

"You saw mommie, of course; you came from home?"

"No, I did not. I got as far as the creek and saw Blue's tracks coming down; so I just sort of trailed along, seeing it was mommie's daughter I felt most like talking to."

"Mommie's daughter" laughed a little and instinctively made a change in the subject. She did not see anything strange in the fact that Ward had observed and recognized Blue's tracks coming into the gorge. She would have observed and recognized

instantly the tracks made by his horse, anywhere. Those things come natural to one who has lived much in the open; and there is a certain individuality in the hoof-prints of a horse, as any plainsman can testify.

"I've got to go in and wash the dishes," she said, stepping back from him. "Of course nothing was done in the cabin, and I've been doing a little house-cleaning. I guess the dish-water is hot by this time – if it hasn't all boiled away."

Ward, as a matter of course, tied his horse to the fence and went into the cabin with her. He also asked her to stake him to a dish-towel, which she did after a good deal of rummaging. He stood with his hat on the back of his head, a cigarette between his lips, and wiped the dishes with much apparent enjoyment. He objected strongly to Billy Louise's assertion that she meant to scrub the floor, but when he found her quite obdurate, he changed his method without in the least degree yielding his point, though for diplomatic reasons he appeared to yield.

He carried water from the creek and filled the tea-kettle, the big iron pot, and both pails. Then, when Billy Louise had turned her back upon him, while she looked in a dark corner for the mop, he suddenly seized her under the arms and lifted her upon the table; and before she had finished her astonished gaspings, he caught up a pail of water and sloshed it upon the floor under her. Then he grinned in his triumph.

"William Louisa, if you get your feet wet, your mommie will take a club to you," he reminded her sternly. Whereupon he

took the broom and proceeded to give that floor a real man's scrubbing, refusing to quarrel with Billy Louise, who scolded like a cross old woman from the table – except when she simply had to stop and laugh heartily at his violent method of cleaning.

Ward sloshed and swept and scrubbed. He dug into the corners with a grim thoroughness that won reluctant approbation from the young woman on the table with her feet tucked under her, and he made her forget poor old Jase up on the hillside. He scrubbed viciously behind the door until the water was little better than a thin, black mud.

"You want to come up to my claim some time," he said, looking over his shoulder while he rested a minute. "I'll show you how a man keeps house, William Louisa. Once a week I pile my two stools on the table, put the cat up on the bunk – and she looks just about as comfortable and happy as mommie's daughter looks right now – and get busy with the broom and good creek water." He resettled his hat on the back of his head and went to work again. "Mill Creek goes dry down below, on the days when little Wardie cleans his cabin," he assured her gravely, and damming up a muddy pool with the broom, he yanked open the door and swept out the water with a perfectly unnecessary flourish, just because he happened to be in a very exuberant mood.

Billy Louise gave a squeal of consternation and then sat absolutely still, staring round-eyed through the doorway. Ward stepped back – even his composure was slightly jarred – and twisted his lips amusedly.

"Hello," he said, after a few blank seconds. "You missed some of it, didn't you?" His tone was mildly commiserating. "Will you come in?"

"N-o-o, thank you, I don't believe I will." The speaker looked in, however, saw Billy Louise perched upon the table, and took off his hat. He was well plastered with dirty water that ran down and left streaks of mud behind. "I must have gotten off the road," he said. "I'm looking for Mr. Jason Meilke's ranch."

Billy Louise tucked her feet farther under her skirts and continued to stare dumbly. Ward, glancing at her from the corner of his eyes, stepped considerately between her and the stranger so that his broad shoulders quite hid her from the man's curious stare.

"You've struck the right place," he said calmly. "This is it." He picked up another pail of water and sloshed it upon the wet floor to rinse off the mud.

"Is – ah – Mrs. Meilke in?" One could not accuse the young man of craning, but he certainly did try to get another glimpse of the person on the table and failed because of Ward.

"She's down in the meadow," Billy Louise murmured.

"She's down in the meadow," Ward repeated to the bespattered young man. "You just go down past the stable and follow on down – " he waved a hand vaguely before he took up the broom again. "You'll find her, all right," he added encouragingly.

"Oh, Ward! That must be Marthy's nephew. What will he think?"

"Does it matter such a h – a deuce of a lot what he thinks?" Ward went on with his interrupted scrubbing.

"His name is Charlie Fox, and he's been to college and he worked in a bank," Billy Louise went on nervously. "He's going to live here with Marthy and run the ranch. What must he have thought! To have you sweep all that dirty water on him – "

"Oh, not all!" Ward corrected cheerfully. "Quite a lot missed him."

Billy Louise giggled. "What does he look like, Ward? You stood squarely in the way, so I – "

"He looked," said Ward dispassionately, "like a pretty mad young man with nose, eyes, and a mouth, and a mole in front of his left ear."

"He was real polite," said Billy Louise reprovingly, "and his voice is nice."

"Yes? I mind-read a heap of cussing. The politeness was all on top." Ward chuckled and swept more water outside. "I expect you saved me a licking that time, Miss William the Conqueror."

"Can you think of any more names to call me, besides my own, I wonder?" Billy Louise leaned and inspected the floor like a chicken preparing to hop off its roost.

"Heaps more." The glow in Ward's eyes was dangerous to their calm friendship. "Want to hear them?"

"No, I don't. I want to get off this table before that college youth comes back to be shocked silly again. I want to see if he's really – got a mole in front of his ear!"

"You know what inquisitiveness did to old lady Lot, don't you? However – " He lifted her in his arms and set her down outside the door. "There, Wilhemina; trot along and see the nice young man."

Billy Louise sat down on the wheelbarrow, remembered its latest service, and got up hastily. "I won't go a step," she asserted positively.

Ward had not wanted her to go. He gave her a smile and finished off his scrubbing with the mop, which he handled with quite surprising skill for a young man who seemed more at home in the saddle than anywhere else.

"I'm awfully glad he came, anyway." Billy Louise pulled down a budded lilac branch and sniffed at it. "I won't have to stay all night, now. I was going to."

"In that case, the young man is welcome as a gold mine. Here they come – he and Mrs. Martha. You'll have to introduce me, Bill-the-Conk; I have never met the lady." Ward hastily returned the mop to its corner, rolled down his sleeves, and picked up his gloves. Then he stepped outside and waited beside Billy Louise, looking not in the least like a man who has just wiped a lot of dishes and scrubbed a floor.

The nephew, striding along behind Marthy and showing head and shoulders above her, seemed not to resent any little mischance, such as muddy water flirted upon him from a broom. He grinned reminiscently as he came up, shook hands with the two of them, and did not let his glance dwell too long or too often

upon Billy Louise, nor too briefly upon Ward.

"You've got a splendid place here, Aunt Martha," he told the old woman appreciatively. "I'd no idea there was such a little beauty-spot down here. This is even more picturesque than that homey-looking ranch we passed a few miles back, down in that little valley. I was hoping that was your ranch when I first saw it; and when I found it wasn't, I came near stopping, anyway. I'm glad I resisted the temptation, now. This is worth coming a long way to see."

"I ain't never had a chance to do all I wanted to with it," said Marthy, with the first hint of apology Billy Louise had ever heard from her. "I only had one pair of hands to work with – "

"We'll fix that part. Don't you worry a minute. You're going to sit in a rocking-chair and give orders, from now on. And if I can't make good here, I ought to be booted all the way up that spooky gorge. Isn't that right?" He turned to Warren with a certain air of appraisement behind the unmistakable cordiality of his voice.

"A man ought to make good here, all right," Ward agreed neutrally. "It's a fine place."

"It ain't as fine as I'd like to see it," began Marthy depreciatingly.

"As you will see it, let's say – if that doesn't sound too conceited from a tenderfoot," supplemented the nephew, and laid his hand upon her shoulder with a gentle little pat. "Folks, I don't want to seem too exuberantly sure of myself, but – " he waved a carefully-kept hand eloquently at the luxuriance around him, " –

I'm all fussed up over this place, honest. I thought I was coming to a shack in the middle of the sage-brush; I was primed to buckle down and make good even in the desert. And bumping into this sort of thing without warning has gone to my alleged brain a bit. What I don't know about ranching would fill a library; but there's this much, anyway. There won't be any more ditch-digging for a certain game little lady in this Cove." He gave the shoulder another pat, and he smiled down at her in a way that made Billy Louise blink. And Marthy, who had probably never before been called a game little lady, came near breaking down and crying before them all.

When Ward went to the stable after Blue, half an hour later, Charlie Fox went with him. His manner when they were alone was different; not so exuberantly cheerful – more frank and practical.

"Honest, it floored me completely to see what that poor old woman has been up against down here," he told Warren, stuffing tobacco into a silver-rimmed, briar pipe while Ward saddled Blue. "I don't know a hell of a lot about this ranch game; but if that old lady can put it across, I guess I can wobble along somehow. Too bad the old man cashed in just now; but Aunt Martha as good as told me he wasn't much force, so maybe I can play a lone hand here as easy as I could have done with him. Live near here?"

"Fifteen miles or so." Ward was not in his most expansive mood, chiefly for the reason that this man was a stranger, and of

strangers he was inclined to fight shy.

"Oh, well – it might have been fifty. I know how you fellows measure distances out here. I'm likely to need a little coaching, now and then, if I live up to what I just now told the old lady."

"From all I know of her, you won't need to go out of the Cove for advice."

"Well, that's right, judging from the looks of things. A woman that can go up against a proposition like she did to-day and handle it alone, is no mental weakling; to say nothing of the way this ranch looks. All right, Warren; I'll make out alone, I reckon."

Afterwards, when Ward thought it over, he remembered gratefully that Charlie Fox had refrained from attempting any discussion of Billy Louise or from asking any questions even remotely personal. He knew enough about men to appreciate the tactful silences of the stranger, and when Billy Louise, on the way home, predicted that the nephew was going to be a success, Ward did not feel like qualifying the verdict.

"He's going to be a godsend to the old lady," he said. "He seems to have his sights raised to making things come easier for her from now on."

"Well, she certainly deserves it. For a college young man – the ordinary, smart young man who comes out here to astonish the natives – he's almost human. I was so afraid that Marthy'd get him out here and then discover he was a perfect nuisance. So many men are."

CHAPTER VI
A MATTER OF TWELVE MONTHS OR SO

Out in the wide spaces, where homes are but scattered oases in the general emptiness, life does not move uniformly, so far as it concerns incidents or acquaintanceships. A man or a ranch may experience complete isolation, and the unbroken monotony which sometimes accompanies it, for a month at a time. Summer work or winter storm may be the barrier temporarily raised, and life resolves itself into a succession of days and nights unbroken by outside influences. They leave their mark upon humans – these periods of isolation. For better, for worse, the man changes slowly with the months; he grows more bovine in his phlegmatic acceptance of his environment, or he becomes restless and fired with a surplus energy of ambition, or he falls to dreaming dreams; whatever angle he takes, he changes, imperceptibly perhaps, but inevitably.

Then the monotony is broken and sometimes with violence. Incident rushes in upon the heels of incident, and life becomes as tumultuous as the many moods of nature when it has a wide, open land for a playground.

That is why, perhaps, so much of western life is painted with broad strokes and raw colors. You are given the crowded

action, the unleashing of emotions and temperaments that have smoldered long under the blanket of solitary living. You are shown an effect without being given the cause of that effect. You pronounce the West wild, and you never think of the long winters that bred in silence and brooding solitude those storm-periods which seem so primitively savage; of the days wherein each nature is thrown upon its own resources, with nothing to feed upon but itself and its own personal interests. And so characters change, and one wonders why.

There was Billy Louise, with her hands and her mind full of the problems her father had died still trying to solve. She did not in the least realize that she was attempting anything out of the ordinary when she took a half-developed ranch in the middle of a land almost as wild as it had been when the Indians wandered over it unmolested, a few cattle and horses and a bundle of debts to make her head swim, and set herself the problem of increasing the number of cattle and eliminating the debts, and of wresting prosperity out of a condition of picturesquely haphazard poverty. She went about it with the pathetic confidence of youth and ignorance. She rode up and down the canyons and over the higher, grassier ridges, to watch the cattle on their summer range and keep them from straying. She went with John Pringle after posts and helped him fence certain fertile slopes and hollows for winter grazing. She drove the rickety old mower through the waving grass along the creek bottom and hummed little, contented tunes while she watched the grass sway and fall evenly

when the sickle shuttled through. She put on her gymnasium bloomers and drove the hay wagon, and felt only a pleasurable thrill of excitement when John Pringle inadvertently pitched an indignant rattlesnake up to her with a forkful of hay. She killed the snake with her pitchfork and pinched off the rattles, proud of their size and number.

When she sold seven fat, three-year-old steers that fall and paid a note twice renewed, managing besides to buy the winter supply of "grub" and a sewing-machine and a set of silver teaspoons for her mother, oh, but she was proud!

Ward rode down to the ranch that night, and Billy Louise showed him the note with its red stamp, oblong and imposing and slightly blurred on the "paid" side. Ward was almost as proud as she, if looks and tones went for anything, and he helped Billy Louise a good deal by telling her just how much she ought to pay for the yearlings old Johnson, over on Snake River, had for sale. Also he told her how much hay it would take to winter them – though she knew that already – and just what percentage of profit she might expect from a given number in a given period of time.

He spoke of his own work and plans, as well. He was going into cattle, also, as fast as possible, he said. In a few years the sheep would probably come in and crowd them out, but in the meantime there was money in cattle – and the more cattle, the more money. He was going to work for wages till the winter set in. He didn't know when he would see Billy Louise, he said, but he would stop on his way back.

To them that short visit was something more than an incident. It gave Ward new stuff for his dreams and new fuel for the fire of ambition. To Billy Louise it also furnished new dream material. She rode the hills and saw in fancy whole herds of cattle where now wandered scattered animals. She dreamed of the time when Ward and Charlie Fox and she would pool their interests and run a wagon of their own, and gather their stock from wide ranges. She was foolish, in that; but that is what she liked to dream.

Mentioning Charlie Fox calls to mind the fact that he was changing more than any of them. Billy Louise did not see him very often, but when she did it was with a deepening impression of his unflagging tenderness to Marthy – a tenderness that manifested itself in many little, unassuming thoughtfulnesses – and of his good-humor and his energy and several other qualities which one must admire.

"Mommie, that nephew goes at everything just as if it were a game," she said after one visit. "You know what that cabin has always been: dark and dirty and not a comfortable chair to sit down in, or a book or magazine or anything? Well, I'm just going to take you over there some day and let you see the difference. He's cut two more windows and built on an addition with a porch, if you please. And he has a bookcase he made himself, just stuffed with books and magazines. And he made Marthy a rocking-chair, mommie, and – she wears a white apron, and has her hair combed, and sits and rocks! Honest to goodness, you wouldn't think she was the same woman."

"Marthy always seemed to me more like a man than a woman," said her mother. "She didn't have nothing domestic in her whole make-up, far as I could see. Her cooking – "

"Well, mommie, Marthy cooks real well now. Charlie praises up her bread, and she takes lots of pains with it. And she just fusses with her flowers and lets him run the ranch; and, mommie, she just worships Charlie! The way she sits and looks at him when he's talking – you can see she almost says prayers to him. She does let her dishpan stay greasy – I don't suppose you can change a person completely – but everything is lots cleaner than it used to be before Charlie came. He's going to buy more cattle, too, he says. Young stock, mostly. He says there's no sense in anybody being poor, in such a country as this. He says he intends to make Marthy rich; Aunt Martha, he calls her. I'm certainly going to take you over to see her, mommie, the very first nice day when I don't have a million other things to do." Billy Louise sighed and pushed her hair back impatiently. "I wish I were a man and as smart as Charlie Fox," she added, with the plaintive note that now sometimes crept into her voice when she realized of a sudden how great a load she was carrying.

"A man can get out and do things. And a woman – why, even Ward seems to think it's perfectly wonderful, mommie, that we don't just about starve, with me running the ranch! I know he does. Every time I do a thing right or pay off a note or anything, he looks as if – "

"I wouldn't be a mite surprised, Billy Louise," said her mother,

with a flash of amused comprehension, "if you kinda misread Ward sometimes. Them eyes of his are pretty keen, and they see a whole lot; but they ain't easy to read, for all that. I guess Ward don't think it's anything surprising that you're getting along so well, Billy Louise. I surmise he knows you're a better manager than a lot of men are."

"I'm not the manager Charlie Fox is, though." Billy Louise was frankly envious.

"He didn't have any more to do with than I've got, and he's accomplished a lot more. And, besides, he started in green at the whole business." She rested her chin in her cupped palms and stared disconsolately at the high-piled hills behind which the sun was setting gloriously. "He's going to pipe water into the house, mommie," she observed, after a silence. "I wish – "

"Well, he's welcome. I don't want no water piped in here, Billy Louise, and tastin' of the pipe. I'd rather carry it and have it sweet and fresh. Don't you go worrying because you can't do everything Charlie Fox does. Likely as not he's pilin' up the debts instead of payin' 'em off as you're doing."

"I don't know; I don't believe he is, though. I think he's just managing right and making every dollar count. He got calves from Seabeck, up the river, cheaper than I did from Johnson, mommie. He rode all over the country and looked up range conditions and prices. He didn't say so, but he made me feel foolish because I just bought the first ones I saw, without waiting to look around first. But – Ward said it was a good buy, and

he ought to know; only, the fact remains that Charlie has done better. I guess it isn't experience that counts, altogether. Charlie Fox has got brains!"

"Land alive! I guess he ain't the only one, Billy Louise. You're doing better than your father done, and he wasn't any Jase Meilke kind of a man, but a good, hard worker always. You don't want to get all outa conceit with yourself just because Charlie Fox is gitting along all right. I don't know as it's so wonderful. Marthy was always forehanded, and she made money there and never spent any to speak of. Though I shouldn't carry the idea she's stingy, after the way she – "

If Billy Louise had not been so absorbed with her own discontent, she might have wondered at her mother's sudden silence. But she did not even notice it. She was comparing two young men and measuring them with certain standards of her own, and she was not quite satisfied with the result. She had seen Charlie Fox spring up with a perfectly natural courtesy and hand Marthy a chair when she entered the room where he had been discussing books with Billy Louise. She had seen him stand beside his own chair until Marthy was seated and then had heard him deftly turn the conversation into a channel wherein Marthy had also an interest. Parlor politeness – and something more; something infinitely finer and better than mere obedience to certain conventional rules.

She had seen that and more, and she had a vivid picture of Ward, sitting absorbed in a book which he never afterwards

mentioned, and letting her or her mother lift heavy pieces of wood upon the fire within arm's reach of him; sitting with his hat tilted back upon his head and a cigarette gone cold in his fingers, and perhaps not replying at all when he was spoken to. She had never considered him uncouth or rude; he was Ward Warren, and these were certain individual traits which he possessed and which seemed a part of him. She had sensed dimly that some natures are too big and too strong for petty rules of deportment, and that Ward might sit all day in the house with his hat on his head and still be a gentleman of the finer sort. And yet, now that Charlie Fox had come and presented an example of the world's standard, Billy Louise could not, for the life of her, help wishing that Ward was different. And there were other things; things which Billy Louise was ashamed to recognize as influencing her in any way, and yet which did influence her. For instance, Ward lived to himself and for himself, and not always wisely or well. He was arrogant in his opinions – Billy Louise had rather admired what she had called his strength, but it had become arrogance now – and his scorn was swift and keen for blunderings. And there was Charlie, always thinking and planning for Marthy and putting her wishes first; wanting to make sure that he himself had not blundered, and with a conservative estimate of himself that was refreshingly modest. And —

"Ain't that Ward coming, Billy Louise? Seems to me it looks like him – the way he rides."

Billy Louise started guiltily and looked up toward the trail,

now piled deep with shadows. It was Ward, all right, and his voice, lifted in a good-humored shout, brought Billy Louise to her feet and sent her down the slope to the stable, where he had stopped as a matter of course.

When he turned and smiled at her through the dusk and said, "'Lo, Bill," in a voice that was like a spoken kiss, a certain young woman hated herself for a weak-souled traitor and mentally called Charlie Fox a popinjay, which was merely shifting injustice to another resting-place.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.