

Bindloss Harold

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CHAPTER I

BARROCK-HOLME

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 He had been a week there now as the guest of Lieutenant Denham, whose acquaintance he had originally made out on the wide prairie in Western Canada, and for whom he had a certain liking that was slightly tinged with contempt.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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Jimmy Denham smiled delicately where another man would have grinned. "Not in the least! In fact, I should consider myself distinctly obliged to you."

"Then you shall have a cheque after dinner."

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

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

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

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

"And the gentleman?" he asked.

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

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

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

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

"A week," said Leland.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Or the men who do?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Whatever made you say that?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Who is he?" she asked.

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

"I know that already."

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

"What does he do out there?"

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

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

CHAPTER II

LELAND IS ROUSED TO PITY

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"You are a farmer?"

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

"You give all your time to it?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I had been three months at McGill – which is to us much the same thing as your Oxford is to you – when the news of my father's death came, and I went back and fought my trustees over what was to be done with the farm. They were two of the cleverest grain and cattle men in Winnipeg, and I was a raw lad, but I beat them. I was to stay at McGill and be educated while they let or sold the place, they said; but I had my way of it and, instead, went back to the prairie where I belonged. Prospect has doubled the acreage it had then."

Carrie Denham listened with slightly languid interest. The narrative had been a bit egotistical, but she could imagine the struggle the lonely lad had waged with the wilderness. She understood already that it was an especially desolate wilderness in which the Prospect farm stood, and Jimmy had told her that Leland had neither brother nor sister. He had made his own way, and had, no doubt, from his point of view, done a good deal with his life; but his outlook was, it seemed to her, necessarily restricted. One should not, however, expect too much from a man born in the wilderness who had had only three months of what could be considered education. She also wondered why he had told her so much, since most of the young men she came across took some trouble to keep their best side

uppermost, until it occurred to her that he probably considered the doubling of the acreage of the Prospect farm a very notable achievement. It scarcely seemed to her to warrant the effort. She loved pleasure. Though she was by no means without a sense of duty, the little graces and amenities of life counted for much with her.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Have you asked yourself why?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

CHAPTER III

PRESSURE OF CIRCUMSTANCES

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Then why isn't it?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"If I could have foreseen that it would lead to this kind of thing, I should never have consented to your grandfather's breaking the entail," he said, with a little whimsical smile. "Lancelly has written me in his usual stand-and-deliver style again: – 'I am now directed to inform you that, unless the last

instalment with arrears of interest is remitted me by next quarter-day, my clients will regretfully feel themselves compelled to foreclose."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

A curious look crept into Denham's face, and it suggested repugnance as well as anxiety. "He came to me yesterday, and his ideas of a settlement were liberal. I pointed out a few of my difficulties to him, and he mentioned rather tastefully that he fancied they could be got over if he had my good

will in the other matter. In fact, he left me with the impression that the mortgage bonds would be handed Carrie after the wedding."

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

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

"Then have you any proposition to make?"

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

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

"The Canadian?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

"What do you expect from me?"

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

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

CHAPTER IV

LELAND MAKES THE PLUNGE

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"It ought to be evident," said the lady, with a little smile. "If everybody's suppositions are correct, I really think Carrie will have enough of Aylmer by-and-bye. There is no reason why she should commence the surfeit now."

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

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

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

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

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

"When are you going back?" she said.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

CHAPTER V

NO ESCAPE

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Carrie laughed bitterly.

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

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

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

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

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

The rest of the afternoon seemed very long to Carrie; but it dragged itself away, and at last she slipped out of the house as the still night was closing down. A full moon had just lifted itself above the ridge of moor. As she flitted along the terrace, the pale, silvery light was creeping across the old grey house. It rose above her, a pile of rudely hewn and weathered stone, not beautiful, for time itself could not make it that with its creeping mosses, houseleek, and lichens, but stamped with a certain rugged stateliness, and the girl, who had much else to think of, felt its influence.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"You have nothing more to urge?"

Leland made a little gesture.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Why?" said Carrie.

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

The girl looked at her with lifted brows.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

CHAPTER VI

THE PRAIRIE

Two long whistles came ringing up the track.

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

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

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

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

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

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

A little red spot burned in Carrie Leland's cheeks. She hovered between anger and humiliation. Social distinctions counted for much in the land of her birth, and it seemed to her that the man she had married might have spared her this vulgarity. It might have been different had she loved him, for she would then, perhaps, have found pleasure in his evident popularity; but, as it was, she felt merely the indignity of being exposed to the gaze and comments of these ox-drivers or ploughmen,

as she took them to be. That she was apparently expected to shake hands with them struck her as ridiculous. The ovation, however, died away, and there was for a moment an uncomfortable silence, during which the crowd gazed at the cold, beautiful woman who regarded them with unsympathetic eyes, until her husband touched her arm again.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Are you warm?" he said.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

She raised herself a trifle, and, looking round with a shiver, saw a half-moon sailing low above a dusky mass of trees. What seemed to be a wooden house stood in the midst of them, and its windows flung out streaks of ruddy light upon the snow. Behind it, she could dimly see a range of strange, shapeless buildings. They did not in the least look like English stables, barns, or granaries. Then there was a sound of voices, and a door swung open, letting out a broader track of brightness, in the midst of which the sleigh pulled up. Shadowy figures appeared here and there, and Leland, who unstrapped the robes, rolled them about her. Then, before she quite realised his purpose, he had lifted her and them together, and was walking stiffly towards the house. In another minute or two he set her down in a little log-walled room which had a tiled stove in the middle of it, and a hard-featured elderly woman came towards her with a kindly smile in her eyes.

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

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

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

He went out, and it was some little time later when Carrie found him awaiting her in a great bare room. There were antelope heads, guns, axes, rifles, and here and there a splendid cluster of

wheat ears, upon the walls, but there was nothing on the floor, and the furniture appeared to consist of a table, a carpenter's bench, a set of bookshelves, and a few lounge chairs. Still, it was well warmed by the big crackling stove, and she sank with a little sigh of physical content into one of the chairs he drew out. Leland, who now wore a jacket of soft white deer-skin, stooped beside her and took one of her still chilly hands in his. It was also the one on a finger of which there gleamed the ring, and he glanced at it with a queer, half-wistful little smile.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"And he naturally came to you?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

CHAPTER VII

CARRIE MAKES HER VIEWS CLEAR

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

In the meanwhile, the girl found the cold unlike anything she had felt in England, but, after the first few minutes, more endurable than she had expected. There was no trace of moisture in that crystalline atmosphere, the sun that had no heat in it shone dazzlingly, and the snow that flung the sun's rays back fell from her feet dusty and dry as flour. No cloud flecked the clear blueness overhead, and fainter washes of the same cold colour marked the beaten trails and prints of horse-hoofs that alone broke the gleaming surface of the white expanse below. On the far horizon she could see grey blurs, which were presumably trees.

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

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

"Is this the usual granary?" she said.

Gallwey laughed. "There are quite a few of them in this country. You see, we don't stack the grain here, but leave most of the straw standing, and thresh in the field, whilst most of the smaller

men rush their grain in to the railroad elevators as soon as that is done. As a rule, they want their money, but Charley had meant to hold wheat this year."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

An unusual colour crept into his wife's face. Both of them were glad that Jake limped in just then with the evening meal, which in that country differs in no way from breakfast or the midday dinner. Salt pork, potatoes, apples, flapjacks or hot cakes with molasses, and strong green tea, it is usually very much the same from Winnipeg to Calgary. Few men have more, or desire it, on the

prairie, and fewer still have less. At the end of the meal, when Jake had cleared away, Carrie Leland looked up questioningly at her husband, who sat opposite her beside the crackling stove. There was nobody else in the big, bare room.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Well?" he said.

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

Leland set his lips for a moment. It would have been a relief just then to tell her that it was to save her from Aylmer, but this appeared a brutality to which he could not force himself, for, in spite

of what she had told him, he could not be sure that it had been his only reason. Her shrinking from him, painful to him as it was, nevertheless had its attraction.

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

He made an emphatic gesture. "Still, we have to face the position as it is, and my part's plain. Everything you have been used to you shall have, so far as I can get it for you. You can have any of your friends here who will make the journey and be civil to your farmer-husband, and you can go to them when it pleases you. To save you ever asking me for money, I will open you an account in a Winnipeg bank, and you need never see me unless you wish to."

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

Leland moved and laid his hand upon her shoulder again.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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