

Bindloss Harold

Harding of Allenwood



Harold Bindloss

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CHAPTER I THE PIONEERS

It was a clear day in September. The boisterous winds which had swept the wide Canadian plain all summer had fallen and only a faint breeze stirred the yellowing leaves of the poplars. Against the glaring blue of the northern sky the edge of the prairie cut in a long, straight line; above the southern horizon rounded cloud-masses hung, soft and white as wool. Far off, the prairie was washed with tints of delicate gray, but as it swept in to the foreground the color changed, growing in strength, to brown and ocher with streaks of silvery brightness where the withered grass caught the light. To the east the view was broken, for the banks of a creek that wound across the broad level were lined with timber – birches and poplars growing tall in the shelter of the ravine and straggling along its crest. Their pale-colored branches glowed among the early autumn leaves.

In a gap between the trees two men stood resting on their axes, and rows of logs and branches and piles of chips were scattered about the clearing. The men were dressed much alike, in shirts that had once been blue but were now faded to an indefinite color, old brown overalls, and soft felt hats that had fallen out of shape. Their arms were bare to the elbows, the low shirt-collars left their necks exposed, showing skin that had weathered, like their clothing, to the color of the soil. Standing still, they were scarcely distinguishable from their surroundings.

Harding was thirty years old, and tall and strongly built. He looked virile and athletic, but his figure was marked by signs of strength rather than grace. His forehead was broad, his eyes between blue and gray, and his gaze gravely steady. He had a straight nose and a firm mouth; and although there was more than a hint of determination in his expression, it indicated, on the whole, a pleasant, even a magnetic, disposition.

Devine was five years younger and of lighter build. He was the handsomer of the two, but he lacked that indefinite something about his companion which attracted more attention.

"Let's quit a few minutes for a smoke," suggested Devine, dropping his ax. "We've worked pretty hard since noon."

He sat down on a log and took out an old corn cob pipe. When it was filled and lighted he leaned back contentedly against a friendly stump.

Harding remained standing, his hand on the long ax-haft, his chin slightly lifted, and his eyes fixed on the empty plain. Between him and the horizon there was no sign of life except that a flock of migrating birds were moving south across the sky in a drawn-out wedge. The wide expanse formed part of what was then the territory of Assiniboia, and is now the province of Saskatchewan. As far as one could see, the soil was thin alluvial loam, interspersed with the stiff "gumbo" that grows the finest wheat; but the plow had not yet broken its surface. Small towns were springing up along the railroad track, but the great plain between the Saskatchewan and the Assiniboine was, for the most part, still a waste, waiting for the tide of population that had begun to flow.

Harding was a born pioneer, and his expression grew intent as he gazed across the wilderness.

"What will this prairie be like, Fred, when those poplars are tall enough to cut?" he said gravely, indicating some saplings beside him. "There's going to be a big change here."

"That's true; and it's just what I'm counting on. That's what made me leave old Dakota. I want to be in on the ground-floor!"

Harding knit his brows, and his face had a concentrated look. He was not given to talking at large, but he had a gift of half-instinctive prevision as well as practical, constructive ability, and just then he felt strangely moved. It seemed to him that he heard in the distance the march of a great army of new home-builders, moving forward slowly and cautiously as yet. He was one of the advance skirmishers, though the first scouts had already pushed on and vanished across the skyline into the virgin West.

"Well," he said, "think what's happening! Ontario's settled and busy with manufactures; Manitoba and the Dakotas, except for the sand-belts, are filling up. The older States are crowded, and somebody owns all the soil that's worth working in the Middle West. England and Germany are overflowing, and we have roughly seven hundred miles of country here that needs people. They must come. The pressure behind will force them."

"But think what that will mean to the price of wheat! It's bringing only a dollar and a half now. We can't raise it at a dollar."

"It will break the careless," Harding said, "but dollar wheat will come. The branch railroads will follow the homesteads; you'll see the elevators dotting the prairie, and when we've opened up this great tableland between the American border and the frozen line, the wheat will pour into every settlement faster than the cars can haul it out. Prices will fall until every slack farmer has mortgaged all he owns."

"Then what good will it do? If the result is to be only mortgages?"

"Oh, but I said every *slack* farmer. It will clear out the incompetent, improve our methods. The ox-team and the grass trail will have to go. We'll have steam gang-plows and graded roads. We'll have better machines all round."

"And afterward?"

Harding's eyes sparkled.

"Afterward? Then the men with brains and grit who have held on – the fittest, who have survived – will come into such prosperity as few farmers have ever had. America, with her population leaping up, will have less and less wheat to ship; England will steadily call for more; we'll have wheat at a price that will pay us well before we're through. Then there'll be no more dug-outs and log-shacks, but fine brick homesteads, with all the farms fenced and mechanical transport on the roads. It's coming, Fred! Those who live through the struggle will certainly see it."

Harding laughed and lifted his ax.

"But enough of that! If we're to get our homesteads up before the frost comes, we'll have to hustle."

The big ax flashed in the sunshine and bit deep into a poplar trunk; but when a few more logs had been laid beside the rest the men stopped again, for they heard a beat of hoofs coming toward them across the prairie. The trees cut off their view of the rider, but when he rounded a corner of the bluff and pulled up his horse, they saw a young lad, picturesquely dressed in a deerskin jacket of Indian make, decorated with fringed hide and embroidery, cord riding-breeches, and polished leggings. His slouch hat was pushed back on his head, showing a handsome face that had in it a touch of imperiousness.

"Hello!" he said, with a look of somewhat indignant surprise. "What are you fellows doing here?"

Harding felt amused at the tone of superiority in the youngster's voice; yet he had a curious, half-conscious feeling that there was something he recognized about the boy. It was not that he had met him before, but that well-bred air and the clean English intonation were somehow familiar.

"If you look around you," Harding smiled, "you might be able to guess that we're cutting down trees."

The boy gave an imperious toss of his head.

"What I meant was that you have no right on this property."

"No?"

"It belongs to us. And logs large enough for building are scarce enough already. As a matter of fact, we're not allowed to cut these ourselves without the Colonel's permission."

"Haven't met him yet," said Devine dryly. "Who's he?"

"Colonel Mowbray, of Allenwood Grange."

"And who's Colonel Mowbray? And where's Allenwood Grange?"

The boy seemed nettled by the twinkle in Devine's eyes, but Harding noticed that pride compelled him to hide his feelings.

"You can't cut this lumber without asking leave! Besides, you're spoiling one of our best coyote covers."

"Kyotes!" exclaimed Devine. "What do you do with 'em?"

The youngster stared at him a moment in disdain.

"We have a pack of hounds at the Grange," he then condescended to answer.

"Hunt them! Well, now, that's mighty strange. I'd have thought you'd find arsenic cheaper. Then if you were to lie out round the chicken-house with a gun – "

The boy cut him short.

"If you want these logs, you must ask for them. Shall I tell the Colonel you are coming to do so?"

"Well, sonny," drawled Devine, "you just run along home and send somebody grown-up. We might talk to him."

"As it happens," the boy said with great dignity, "Kenwyne is in the bluff. I must warn you not to touch a tree until you see him."

Without another word he turned and rode off.

During the conversation Harding had been studying him closely. The well-bred reserve in his manner, which, while peremptory, was somehow free from arrogance, compelled the man's admiration.

"From the Old Country," he said with a laugh, "and a bit high-handed, but there's sand in him. Do you know anything about Allenwood?"

"Not much, but I heard the boys talking about it at the railroad store. It's a settlement of high-toned Britishers with more money than sense. They play at farming and ride round the country on pedigree horses."

"The horse the boy rode was certainly a looker!" Harding commented, swinging his ax once more.

As it sliced out a chip with a ringing thud, and another, and yet another, the boy returned, accompanied by a well-mounted older man with a sallow face and very dark eyes and a languidly graceful air. The man was plainly dressed but he wore the stamp Harding had noticed on the youngster; and again there flashed through Harding's mind the half-indistinct thought that these people were familiar to him.

"I understand that you insist upon cutting this timber," Kenwyne began.

"Yes," Harding replied. "And I was surprised when your friend here said it belonged to Colonel Mowbray."

"He went too far, but it does belong to him in a sense. The Colonel founded the settlement when very few other people thought of leaving Manitoba, and he had the usual option of cutting all the wood he wanted on unoccupied land. We have always got it here, and as we have done all the road-making and general improvements in the neighborhood, we have come to look upon it as our own."

"Is that your bridge across the creek?"

"Yes; and it's not a bad job, I think. We had a good deal of trouble digging out the grade in the ravine."

"Well, interfering with bridges is not a habit of mine; so we'll let your trail stand. But I could make you divert it to the proper road reserve."

"Ah!" exclaimed Kenwyne. "That sounds significant."

"Precisely. This bluff and the section it stands on belong to me; the transfer was registered at the land office a week ago."

"Then I think there's nothing more to be said."

"Oh," Harding responded with a smile, "you might tell your Colonel that when he wants any lumber he may cut it if he'll let me know!"

Kenwyne laughed.

"Thanks!" he said. "It's a generous offer, but I can't promise that Colonel Mowbray will avail himself of your permission. I wish you good afternoon."

He rode away with his companion, and an hour later Harding and Devine threw their axes on their shoulders and struck out across the prairie. The sun had dipped, the air was getting cool, and on the clean-cut western horizon a soft red flush faded beneath a band of vivid green.

At the foot of a low rise the men stopped.

"I'll be around the first thing in the morning," Devine said.

"Then you're not coming to supper?"

"No," Devine answered reluctantly; "I guess not. I've been over twice this week, and Hester has enough to do without extra cooking for me."

"As you wish," said Harding, and they separated in a friendly manner.

When he was alone Harding went on briskly, walking with an elastic step and looking far ahead across the shadowy plain. It was a rich land that stretched away before him, and a compact block of it belonged to him. It was virgin soil, his to do with as he liked. He thought that he could make good use of it; but he had no illusions; he knew all about prairie farming, and was prepared for a hard struggle.

Crossing the rise, he headed for a glow of light that flickered in the gloom of a small birch bluff, and presently stopped at a tent pitched among the trees. Two big red oxen were grazing by the edge of the bluff, a row of birch logs lay among the grass beside a pile of ship-lap boards, and some more of the boards had been roughly built into a pointed shack. In front of this a young girl bent over a fire that burned between two logs. All round, except where the wood broke the view, the wilderness rolled away, dim and silent.

Hester Harding looked up with a smile when her brother stopped. She resembled him, for she had his direct, thoughtful glance and fine proportions. Her face and hands were browned by sun and wind, but, although she had worked hard from childhood, she wore no coarsening stamp of toil. Her features were good, and the plain print dress she had made in her scanty spare time became her.

"Tired, Craig?" she asked in a pleasant voice.

"Not quite as fresh as I was at sun-up," Harding smiled. "We got through a good deal of work to-day and I'll soon be able to make a start with the house. We'll have to rush the framing to get finished before the frost."

While they ate their simple supper they talked about his building plans, and he answered her questions carefully; for Hester had keen intelligence, and had shared his work and ambitions for the past few years. For the most part, their life had been hard and frugal. Until Craig reached the age of eighteen, he had helped his father to cultivate his patch of wheat-soil in an arid belt of North Dakota. Then the father had died, leaving about a thousand dollars besides his land and teams, and the lad had courageously taken up the task of supporting his mother and sister. Two years afterward, Mrs. Harding died, and Craig, at the age of twenty, set himself to consider the future.

During his management of the farm he had made more money than his father had ever made, but the land was poor and incapable of much improvement. On the other hand, Dakota was getting settled and homesteads were becoming valuable, and Craig determined to sell out and invest the money in a larger holding in a thinly populated part of Manitoba. Hester went with him to Canada; and when the advancing tide of settlement reached their new home, Craig sold out again, getting much more than he had paid for his land, and moved west ahead of the army of prairie-breakers which he

knew would presently follow him. It was a simple plan, but it needed courage and resourcefulness. He spoke of it to Hester when he lighted his pipe after the meal.

"It was a notion of Father's that one should try to anticipate a big general movement," he remarked. "'Keep a little in front; the pioneers get the pickings,' he once told me. 'If you follow the main body, you'll find the land swept bare.' He had a way of saying things like that; I learned a good deal from him."

"He knew a good deal," said Hester thoughtfully. "He was more clever than you are, Craig, but he hadn't your habit of putting his ideas into practise. I've sometimes thought he must have lost heart after some big trouble long ago, and only made an effort now and then for Mother's sake. It's strange that we know nothing about him except that he came from the Old Country."

Craig had often wondered about his father, for the man had been somewhat of an enigma to him. Basil Harding had lived like his neighbors, who were plain tillers of the soil, and he never spoke of his English origin, but now and then he showed a breadth of thought and refinement of manner that were not in keeping with his environment. Mrs. Harding was the daughter of a Michigan farmer, a shrewd but gentle woman of practical turn of mind.

"I wonder," Craig said, "how much Mother knew?"

"She must have known something. Once or twice, near the end, I think she meant to tell us, for there was something troubling her, but the last stroke came so suddenly, and she never spoke." Hester paused, as if lost in painful memories, and then went on: "It was very strange about that money you got."

Craig nodded. When he was twenty-one a Winnipeg lawyer had turned over to him five thousand dollars on condition that he remain in Canada, and make no attempt to communicate with his father's relatives.

"Yes," he said. "And something happened this afternoon that puzzled me."

He told Hester about his meeting with the men from Allenwood.

"The curious thing about it," he added, "is that as I watched the boy sitting on his fine blooded horse and heard him speak, I felt as if I'd once lived among high-toned English people and could somehow understand what he was thinking. But of course I never had a horse like his, and we were born in a rough shack on a poor Dakota farm. Can one inherit one's ancestors' feelings and memories?"

"It's very strange," mused Hester.

Harding laughed.

"Well, anyway, I'm a farmer," he said. "I stand upon my own feet – regardless of ancestors. What I am is what I make of myself!"

He moved off toward the tent.

"It's getting late," he called back to her.

But for a long time Hester sat beside the sinking fire. Her brother, whom she loved and admired, differed slightly, but noticeably in one or two respects, from any of the prairie farmers she had known. Though it was hard to procure books, he had read widely and about other subjects than agriculture. Odd tricks of thought and speech also suggested the difference; but she knew that nobody else except her mother had noticed it, for, to all intents, Craig was merely a shrewd, hard-working grower of wheat.

Then the girl's face grew gentle as she thought of Fred Devine. He had proved very constant and had several times made what was then a long and adventurous journey to see her. Now, when his father had given him a few hundred dollars, he had followed Craig, and she was ready to marry him as soon as he could make a home for her. At present he was living in a dug-out in a bank, and must harvest his first crop before he could think about a house.

When the fire had died down to a few smoldering coals, Hester got up and looked about her. The moon hung, large and red, above the prairie's rim; the air was sharp and wonderfully exhilarating. Behind the tent the birch leaves rustled softly in the bluff, and in the distance a coyote howled. There

was no other sound; it was all very still and strangely lonely; but the girl felt no shrinking. On her mother's side she sprang from a race of pioneers, and her true work was to help in the breaking of the wilderness.

CHAPTER II

PORTENTS OF CHANGE

The moon was above the horizon when Kenwyne pulled up his horse to a walk opposite Allenwood Grange. The view from this point always appealed to the artist in Kenwyne. The level plain was broken here by steep, sandy rises crowned with jack-pines and clumps of poplar, and a shallow lake reached out into the open from their feet. A short distance back from its shore, the Grange stood on a gentle slope, with a grove of birches that hid the stables and outbuildings straggling up the hill behind.

As Kenwyne saw it in the moonlight across the glittering water, the house was picturesque. In the center rose a square, unpretentious building of notched logs; but from this ship-lap additions, showing architectural taste, stretched out in many wings, so that, from a distance, the homestead with its wooded back-ground had something of the look of an old English manor house. It was this which made the colonists of Allenwood regard it with affection. Now it was well lighted, and the yellow glow from its windows shone cheerfully across the lake.

The foundations of the place had been laid in unsettled times, after the Hudson Bay fur-traders had relinquished their control of the trackless West, but before the Dominion Government had established its authority. The farmers were then spreading cautiously across the Manitoban plain, in some fear of the Metis half-breeds, and it was considered a bold adventure when the builder of the Grange pushed far out into the prairies of the Assiniboine. He had his troubles, but he made his holding good, and sold it to Colonel Mowbray, who founded the Allenwood settlement.

On the whole, the colony had succeeded, but Kenwyne saw that it might become an anachronism in changing times. He had noted the advance of the hard-bitten homesteaders who were settling wherever the soil was good, and who were marked by sternly utilitarian methods and democratic ideas. Before long Allenwood must cast off its aristocratic traditions and compete with these newcomers; but Kenwyne feared that its founder was not the man to change.

As he rode slowly past the lake, a man came toward him with a gun and a brace of prairie-chickens.

"Hello, Ralph!" he said. "Have you forgotten that it's council night?"

"I'm not likely to forget after the rebuke I got for missing the last meeting," Kenwyne replied. "Do you happen to know what kind of temper the Colonel is in, Broadwood?"

"My opinion is that it might be better. Gerald Mowbray has turned up again, and I've noticed that the old man is less serene than usual when his son's about. In fact, as we have to bear the consequences, I wish the fellow would stay away."

While Broadwood and Kenwyne were discussing him on the hillside, Colonel Mowbray sat in his study at the Grange, talking to the elder of his two sons. The room was small and plainly furnished, with a map of the territory on the matchboarded wall, a plain table on which lay a few bundles of neatly docketed papers, and a stove in one corner. Account-books filled a shelf, and beneath there was a row of pigeonholes. The room had an air of austere simplicity with which Colonel Mowbray's appearance harmonized.

He was tall, but spare of flesh, with an erect carriage and an autocratic expression. His hair was gray, his eyes were dark and keen, and his mouth was unusually firm; but the hollowness of his face and the lines on his forehead showed advancing age. He was a man of some ability, with simple tastes, certain unchangeable convictions, and a fiery temper. Leaving the army with a grievance which he never spoke about, and being of too restless a character to stay at home, he had founded Allenwood for the purpose of settling young Englishmen upon the land. He demanded that they be well born, have means enough to make a fair start, and that their character should bear strict investigation. Though

the two latter conditions were not invariably complied with, his scheme had prospered. Mowbray was generous, and had taken the sons of several old friends who did not possess the capital required; while the discipline he enforced had curbed the wayward. For the most part, the settlers regarded him with affection as well as respect; but he had failed most signally with his own son, who now stood rather awkwardly before him.

After serving for a year or two in India as an engineer lieutenant, Gerald Mowbray met with an accident which forced him to leave the army. He made an unsuccessful start on another career, and had of late been engaged upon a Government survey of the rugged forest-belt which runs west to the confines of the Manitoban plain. He was a handsome, dark-complexioned man, but looked slacker and less capable than his father.

"I think five hundred pounds would clear me," he said in an apologetic tone. "If I could pay off these fellows, it would be a great relief, and I'd faithfully promise to keep clear of debt in future."

"It seems to me I've heard something of the kind on previous occasions," Mowbray returned dryly. "There's a weak strain in you, Gerald, though I don't know where you got it. I suppose a thousand pounds would be better?"

Gerald's eyes grew eager; but the next moment his face fell, for he knew his father's methods, and saw his ironical smile.

"Well," he said cautiously, "I could straighten things out if I had five hundred."

"With what you got from your mother!"

Gerald winced. His mother never refused him, even though he knew that it often meant sacrifice on her part.

"To save our name," Mowbray said sternly, "and for that reason only, I am going to let you have three hundred pounds. But I warn you, it's the last you'll get. You may as well know that it is hard to spare this."

Gerald looked his surprise.

"I thought – "

Mowbray interrupted him.

"My affairs are not so prosperous as they seem; but I rely on you not to mention the fact. Now you may go. But, remember – there's to be no more money thrown away!"

When Gerald closed the door, Mowbray took down one of his account-books, and sat still for a long time studying it. He had never been rich, but he had had enough, and as the settlement grew up he had felt justified in selling to newcomers, at moderate prices, land which he had got as a free grant. Now, however, the land was nearly all taken up. For a time he bred cattle, but this had scarcely paid; then the development of the milling industry and the building of elevators rendered wheat-growing possible, and though the grain had to be hauled a long way, Mowbray made a small profit. Prices, however, were falling, and land nearer the railroad was coming into cultivation.

With a gloomy air, Mowbray closed the book and went down to preside over the council which was held periodically and, as a rule, ended in an evening of social amusement.

The hall was large and square, with matchboarded walls and a pointed roof. In an open hearth a log fire burned cheerily, although two large windows were opened wide to let in the September air. Bunches of wheat and oats of unusual growth hung upon the walls, suggesting the settlers' occupation; but it was significant that the grain was surmounted by a row of the heads of prairie antelope, as well as moose and caribou from the North. They were farmers at Allenwood, but they were sportsmen first.

About a dozen men were sitting round a table when Mowbray entered, but they rose and waited until he took his place. They varied in age from twenty to forty, and in their easy manners and natural grace one recognized the stamp of birth. Evening dress was not the rule at Allenwood, and while some wore white shirts and city clothes, others were attired picturesquely in red-laced blue vests and fringed deerskin. Their brown faces and athletic figures indicated a healthy life in the open, but they had too gallant and careless an air for toilers.

A few suggestions for the improvement of the trails were made and discussed; and then Mowbray turned to Kenwyne, who had spent the afternoon looking for suitable logs for the bridge-stringers.

"Did you and Lance find anything?" Mowbray asked.

Kenwyne was waiting for this opening to make what he felt was an important announcement.

"We went to the bluff," he said. "What we found was two homesteaders cutting down all the best trees."

"Homesteaders!"

Mowbray frowned and the others looked interested.

"You warned them off, of course!"

"Lance did. But one of the fellows retorted that the timber was his."

"Impossible!" Mowbray said sharply. "The nearest preemption is six miles off – and that's too close!"

"It appears that the man has just bought the section on our western range-line. He referred me to the land register, if I had any doubt. I'm afraid you must take it for granted, sir, that we are going to have neighbors."

"Never!" Mowbray brought his fist down on the table with a resounding blow. "We may not be able to turn out these intruders, but I decline to consider them neighbors of ours." He turned to the others. "You must see that this is disturbing news. We came here to live in accordance with the best English traditions, and although we had to put up with some hardships, there were compensations – abundant sport, space, and freedom. In a sense, the country was ours, with its wood and water, as far as we cared to ride. Now every homestead that is built restricts what we have regarded, with some justice, as our rights. We took heavy risks in settling here when people believed it was economically impossible to farm at Allenwood."

There was a murmur of approval.

"These fellows will put an end to our running range horses and cattle," one man said. "If many of them come into the district, we may have to put down the coyote hounds, and ask permission before we course a jack-rabbit. Then they could make us divert our trails to the road reserves."

"Something of that kind may happen," Kenwyne interposed. "But the fellow I met seemed inclined to be friendly. Said he'd let our trail stand and we might cut what wood we wanted, provided we get his permission."

Mowbray drew himself up haughtily.

"Although you recognize the lesser drawbacks," he said, "I'm afraid you miss the most important point. I must remind you that this settlement was founded to enable a certain stamp of Englishmen to enjoy a life that was becoming more difficult without large means at home. A man with simple tastes could find healthy occupation out of doors, keep a good horse, and get as much shooting as he wanted. So long as his farming covered, or nearly covered, his expenses, that was all that was required. We have not discouraged the making of money, but I must frankly say that this was not our object. Now I see threats of change. We may be brought into contact, and perhaps into opposition, with men whose motives are different. Their coming here has to me a sinister meaning."

"Allenwood has been a success," said Broadwood; "one can't deny it – but I think we owe a good deal to our having settled in a new and undeveloped country. The experiment turned out well because we got the land cheap and wheat was dear. Now I foresee a sharp fall in prices, and it seems to me that we may have to revise our methods to suit the times. In future, we may find it difficult to live upon our farms unless we work them properly. I'm afraid we can't stand still while Canada moves on – and I'm not sure that it's a great misfortune."

"Do you admire modern methods?" somebody asked. "If you do, you'd better study what things are coming to in America and England. There is not a hired man at Allenwood who is not on first-rate terms with his master; do you want to under-pay and over-drive them or, on the other hand, to

have them making impossible demands, and playing the mischief by a harvest strike? I agree with our respected leader that we don't want to change."

"But tell us about these intruders," Mowbray said to Kenwyne. "What sort of men are they?"

"Well, first of all, they're workers; there's no mistaking that. And I'd judge that they came from the States – Dakota, perhaps."

"That is to say, they're hustlers!" a lad broke in. "Couldn't we buy them out before they get started, sir?"

"It would cost us something to buy a section, and we would have to work part of it to pay the new taxes. Then the fellows would probably find out that it was an easy way of getting a good price; and we couldn't keep on buying them out. We have all the land we want, and must be careful whom we allow to join us."

"I think we should try to keep an open mind," Kenwyne suggested. "It might pay us to watch the men and see what they can teach us. Sooner or later we shall have to improve our farming, and we may as well begin it gradually. After all, it's something to gather two bushels of wheat where only one grew."

Mowbray looked at him sternly.

"I'm sorry to see you and Broadwood taking this line, Ralph; but I've long suspected that your views were not quite sound. Frankly, I'm afraid of the thin end of the wedge." He turned to the others. "You will understand that there can be no compromise. We shall continue to live as English gentlemen and have nothing to do with the grasping commercialism that is getting a dangerous hold on the older countries. I will do my best to keep Allenwood free from it while I have the power."

"Whatever my private opinions are, I think you know you can rely on my loyal support in all you do for the good of the settlement, sir," Kenwyne replied. "Now that we have the matter before us, it might be well if you told us how we are to treat these Americans. We're bound to meet them."

"I cannot suggest discourtesy, since it would be foreign to your character and against our traditions; but I do not wish you to become intimate with them."

When the meeting broke up an hour later, Broadwood walked home with Kenwyne. It was a small and unpretentious house that perched on the hillside beyond the lake, but the room the men entered was comfortably furnished. A few photographs of officers in uniform, the football team of a famous public school, and the crew of an Oxford racing boat, hung on the pine-board walls.

"We must have a talk," said Kenwyne. "I feel that these fellows' settling here is important; it's bound to make a difference. I know the type; one can't ignore them. They'll have to be reckoned with, as friends or enemies."

"In spite of the Colonel's opinion, I believe their influence will be for good. What Allenwood needs most is waking up." Broadwood laughed. "It's curious that we should agree on this. Of course, my marriage is supposed to account for my perversion; but one can understand Mowbray's painful surprise at you. Your views ought to be sound."

"What is a sound view?"

"At Allenwood, it's a view that agrees with Mowbray's."

"Let's be serious," Kenwyne replied. "There's something to be said for his contention, after all. We have got along pretty well so far."

"Yes; but the settlement has never been self-supporting. Mowbray got the land for nothing and sold it in parcels, as he was entitled to do, spending part of the price on improvements from which we all benefit. Then a number of the boys got drafts from home when they lost a crop. We have been living on capital instead of on revenue; but the time is coming when this must stop. Our people at home can't keep on financing us, and the land is nearly all taken up."

"Well, what follows?"

"Allenwood will shortly have to earn its living," Broadwood answered, laughing. "This will be a shock to some of our friends, but even with wheat going down the thing shouldn't prove insuperably difficult."

"We may have wheat at less than a dollar. Look at the quantity of good land that's available, and the character of the men who're coming in. They'll live on revenue, in dug-outs and fifty-dollar shacks, and all they don't spend on food will go into new teams and implements. They don't expect an easy time, and won't get it, but we'll have to meet their competition. Personally, I don't think that's impossible. I believe we're their equals in brain and muscle."

"We used to think we were superior," Broadwood smiled. "Our conservative sentiments will be our greatest difficulty."

"I'm afraid we'll have to get rid of them."

"Mowbray will never throw his traditions overboard."

"No. I see trouble ahead," said Kenwyne.

"It's an awkward situation, I'll admit. Instead of Mowbray's leading us, we'll have to carry him along, so to speak, without his knowing it. As he's not a fool, the thing may need more tact than we're capable of. For all that, he must remain leader."

"Of course," said Kenwyne simply. "He made Allenwood. We must stick to him."

Long after Broadwood had gone, Kenwyne stood at the door of his house, looking out over the lake. There was no wind, and the prairie was very silent. Stretching back in the moonlight to the horizon, its loneliness was impressive; but Kenwyne was not deceived. He knew that the tide of population and progress had already passed its boundaries and was flowing fast up every channel, following the railroad, the rivers, and the fur-traders' trails. It would wash away the old landmarks and undermine every barrier that Mowbray could raise. Kenwyne wondered what would happen when Allenwood was surrounded by the flood. After all, it depended upon the settlers whether the inundation proved destructive or fertilizing.

CHAPTER III

AT THE FORD

A few days after the council, Beatrice, Colonel Mowbray's only daughter, sat talking with her mother in the drawing-room at the Grange. Beatrice had returned on the previous evening from a visit to England, and it struck her, perhaps by contrast with the homes of her mother's friends, that the room had a dingy, cheerless look. The few pieces of good furniture which Mowbray had brought with him had suffered during transport and showed signs of age; the others, sent out from Toronto, were crudely new. Rugs and curtains were faded, and there were places that had been carefully mended. The matchboarded walls looked very bare. More than all, it struck the girl that her mother seemed listless and worn.

Mrs. Mowbray was a gentle, reserved woman. She was still beautiful, but the years she had spent upon the prairie had left their mark on her. She had lost her former vivacity and something of her independence of thought; and, except to those who knew her well, her character seemed colorless. Mowbray was considerate of his wife, but there was no room under his roof for two directing wills or more than one set of opinions. For all that, Mrs. Mowbray wore an air of quiet dignity.

Beatrice had a trace of her father's imperious temper. She looked very fresh, for a life spent largely out of doors had given her a vigorous, graceful carriage as well as a fine, warm color, and had set a sparkle in her deep-blue eyes. There was a hint of determination about her mouth, and her glance was often proud. She was just twenty-two, and the fashionable English dress set off her gracefully outlined and rather slender figure.

As she looked at her mother her face grew thoughtful.

"You are not looking well, Mother dear," she said.

"I am not ill," Mrs. Mowbray answered in a tired voice. "It has been a very hot and trying summer, and the crop was poor. That had its effect upon your father. Then you have heard that Gerald —"

There was a quick, indignant flash in Beatrice's eyes.

"Yes, I know! Of course, I stand up for him to outsiders, but I'm getting ashamed of Gerald. His debts must have been a heavy tax on Father. I think that too much has been done for the boys. I have nothing to complain of; but we're not rich, and I'm afraid you have had to suffer."

"My dear, you mustn't question your father's judgment."

Beatrice smiled.

"I suppose not, and my criticism would certainly be wasted; still, you can't expect me to have your patience."

She went to one of the long windows in the drawing-room and threw it open wide.

"How I love the prairie!" she exclaimed, looking out over the vast plain that stretched away to a sky all rose and purple and gold.

A tired smile crept into her mother's face.

"It has its charm," she said; "but, after all, you have been away at school, and have not seen much of it. One has to do without so much here, and when you have gone through an unvarying round of duties day after day for years, seeing only the same few people and hearing the same opinions, you find it dreary. One longs to meet clever strangers and feel the stir and bustle of life now and then; but instead there comes another care or a fresh responsibility. You don't realize yet what a bad harvest or a fall in the wheat market means; for, while the men have their troubles, in a settlement like Allenwood, the heaviest burden falls upon the women."

"You must have had to give up a good deal to come here," Beatrice said.

"I loved your father, and I knew that he could not be happy in England," was the simple answer.

Beatrice was silent for a few moments. It was the first time she had understood the sacrifice her mother had made, and she was moved to sympathy. Then, in the flighty manner of youth, she changed the subject.

"Oh, I must tell you about dear Mr. Morel!" Catching an alert look in her mother's eyes, Beatrice laughed. Then, with a quick, impulsive movement, she crossed the floor, took her mother's face between both her hands, and kissed it. "No," she answered the question that had not been spoken; "Mr. Morel is a lovely old man who lives all alone, with just his servants, at Ash Garth, in a fine old house full of art treasures that seem to have been collected from all over the world. And there's a rose garden between the lawn and the river, and a big woods all round. Mr. Morel is charming, and he was particularly kind to me, because he and Uncle Gordon are such great friends."

"Did you see much of him?"

"Oh, yes; and I like him. But, Mother," Beatrice lowered her voice dramatically, "there's a mystery in his life. I'm sure of it! I asked Uncle Gordon; but if he knew he wouldn't tell. Then I tried to question Mr. Morel – "

"Why, Beatrice!"

The girl laughed at her mother's shocked tone.

"Don't worry, Mother dear. He didn't know I was questioning him. And I do love a mystery! All I learned was that it has something to do with Canada. Whenever I talked about the prairie he looked so sad, and once I even thought I saw tears in his eyes."

Beatrice's brows came together in a perplexed frown; then she laughed gently.

"Mysteries have a fascination for me," she said; "I like to puzzle them out. But I must leave you now; for I promised to go see Evelyn this afternoon. I may not get home until late."

Half an hour later Beatrice was in the saddle riding across the bare sweep of prairie to one of the distant homesteads. When she reached the river, the stream was turbid and running fast, but a narrow trail through the poplars on its bank led to the ford, and she urged her horse into it fearlessly. On the other side the trail was very faint, and a stake upon a rise indicated where the crossing was safe. A large grass fire was burning some miles away, for a tawny cloud of smoke trailed across the plain.

Beatrice spent a pleasant hour with her friend and started home alone as dusk was falling. The sky was clear, and the moon hung some distance above the horizon. A cold breeze had sprung up, and the grass fire had grown fiercer. Beatrice could see it stretching toward the river in a long red line; and after a while she rode into the smoke. It grew thicker and more acrid; she could not see her way; and her horse was getting frightened. When an orange glare leaped up not far away, the animal broke into a gallop, pulling hard, and after some trouble in stopping it Beatrice changed her direction. She was not afraid of prairie fires, which, as a rule, can be avoided easily, but this one would necessitate her making a round.

She found it difficult to get out of the smoke, and when she reached the river it was at some distance above the stake. She could not ride back, because the fire was moving up from that direction, cutting her off. She glanced dubiously at the water. It ran fast between steep, timber-covered banks. She did not think she could get down to it, and she knew there was only one safe ford. Still, she could not spend the night upon the wrong bank, and the fire was drawing closer all the time. Worse still, her horse was becoming unmanageable. She rode upstream for a mile; but the river looked deep, and the eddies swirled in a forbidding way; the bank was abrupt and rotten, and Beatrice dared not attempt it. In front, the moon, which was getting higher, threw a clear light upon the water; behind, the smoke rolled up thickly to meet her. The fire was closing in upon the stream. With his nostrils filled with the sting of the smoke, the horse reared and threatened to dash over the crumbling bank. Beatrice, realizing her danger, turned him back downstream and gave him the rein.

She did not hope to reach the ford – there was a wall of impenetrable fire and smoke between her and the stake; she could not attempt the river where the bank was so steep and the current so swift.

With her own eyes smarting, and her breathing difficult, Beatrice suddenly leaned forward and patted the trembling horse. He had not been able to run far with his lungs full of smoke, and he had now stopped in a moment of indecision.

"Good boy!" she coaxed, in a voice that was not quite steady. "Go a little farther, and then we'll try the river."

"*Hello!*" came out of the darkness; and through the acrid haze she saw a man running toward her.

She hailed him eagerly; but when he reached her she was somewhat disconcerted to notice that he was not, as she had expected, one of the Allenwood settlers.

She saw that he was waiting for her to speak.

"I want to get across, and the fire has driven me from the ford," she said.

"Where are you going?"

"To the Grange."

"By your leave!"

He took the bridle and moved along the bank, though he had some trouble with the frightened horse. When they had gone a few yards he turned toward an awkward slope.

"Is this crossing safe?" Beatrice asked in alarm.

"It's not good," he answered quietly. "I can take you through."

Beatrice did not know what gave her confidence, because the ford looked dangerous, but she let him lead the stumbling horse down to the water. The next moment the man was wading knee-deep, and the stream frothed about the horse's legs. The current was swift and the smoke was thick and biting, but the man went steadily on, and they were some distance from the bank when he turned to her.

"Pick up your skirt," he said bluntly; "it gets steeper."

Beatrice laughed in spite of her danger. The man certainly did not waste words.

When they were nearly across, the moon was suddenly hidden behind a dark cloud, and at that moment the horse lost its footing and made a frantic plunge. Beatrice gasped. But her fright was needless, for her companion had firm control of the animal, and in another few moments they were struggling up the bank.

As they left the timber and came out of the smoke, into the broad moonlight, she told him to stop, for the saddle had slipped in climbing the bank. Then, for the first time, they saw each other clearly.

He was a big man, with a quiet brown face, and Beatrice noticed his start of swift, half-conscious admiration as he looked up at her. It caused her no embarrassment, because she had seen that look on the faces of other men, and knew that she was pretty; but she failed to estimate the effect of her beauty on a man unaccustomed to her type. Sitting with easy grace upon the splendid horse, she had a curiously patrician air. He noticed her fine calm, the steadiness of her deep-blue eyes, and the delicate chiseling of her features; indeed, he never forgot the picture she made, with the poplars for a background and the moonlight on her face.

"Thank you; I'm afraid you got very wet," she said. "I know my way now."

"You can't ride on," he answered. "The cinch buckle's drawn."

"Oh!"

"You'd better come on to my place. My sister will look after you while I fix it." He smiled as he added: "Miss Mowbray, I presume? You may have heard of me – Craig Harding, from the section just outside your line."

"Oh!" Beatrice repeated. "I didn't know we had neighbors; I have been away. Have you met any of the Allenwood people?"

"A sallow-faced man with dark eyes."

"Kenwyne," said Beatrice. "He's worth knowing. Anybody else?"

"There was a lad with him; about eighteen, riding a gray horse."

"Yes; my brother Lance."

Harding laughed softly.

"That's all," he said; "and our acquaintance didn't go very far."

Beatrice wondered at his amusement, and she gave him a curious glance. He was dressed in old brown overalls, and she thought he had something of the look of the struggling farmers she had seen in Manitoba, hard-bitten men who had come from the bush of Ontario, but there was a difference, though she could not tell exactly where it lay. Harding's clothes were old and plain, and she could see that he worked with his hands, yet there was something about him which suggested a broader mind and more culture than she associated with the rude preceptors. Then, though he was curt, his intonation was unusually clean.

She asked him a few questions about his farm, which he answered pleasantly. They were walking side by side along one of the prairie trails, and he was leading the horse. The breeze had fallen and the night was unusually still, broken only by a coyote calling insistently to his mate; the wide, bare prairie ahead of them lay bathed in moonlight.

Presently a light twinkled across the plain; and Beatrice welcomed it, because, in spite of the precautions she had taken, her long skirt was wet and uncomfortable.

When they reached the camp they found Hester busy cooking at a fire. Behind her stood a rude board shelter and a tent, and farther off the skeleton of a house rose from the grass.

Beatrice studied Hester Harding with interest. Though she found her simply dressed, with sleeves rolled back and hands smeared with flour, the prairie girl made a favorable impression on her. She liked the sensitive, grave face, and the candid, thoughtful look.

While the girth was being mended, the girls talked beside the fire. Then Harding saddled his own horse, and he and Beatrice rode off across the prairie. When the lights of the Grange were visible he turned back; and soon afterward Beatrice was laughingly relating her adventure to her mother and Lance.

"So it was Harding who helped you!" Lance exclaimed. "I made a rather bad blunder in talking to him the other day – told him he mustn't cut some timber which it seems was his. But, I must say, he was rather decent about it."

He looked at his sister curiously, and then laughed.

"On the whole," he added, as she started up the stairs, "it might be better not to say anything about your little experience to the Colonel. I'm inclined to think it might not please him."

Beatrice saw that her mother agreed with Lance, and she was somewhat curious; but she went on up to her room without asking any questions.

She began to feel interested in Harding.

CHAPTER IV

THE OPENING OF THE RIFT

A week after his meeting with Beatrice Mowbray, Harding went out one morning to plow. He was in a thoughtful mood, but it was characteristic that he did not allow his reflections to interfere with his work. His house was unfinished, and the nights were getting cold; but neither Hester nor he placed personal comfort first, and there was a strip of land that must be broken before the frost set in.

It was a calm morning and bright sunshine poured down upon the grass that ran back, growing faintly blue in the distance, until it faded into the mellow haze that shut in the wide circle of prairie. Here and there the smooth expanse was broken by small, gleaming ponds and wavy lines of timber picked out in delicate shades of indigo and gray, but the foreground was steeped in strong color. Where the light struck it, the withered grass shone like silver; elsewhere it was streaked with yellow and cinnamon. The long furrows traced across it were a rich chocolate-brown, and the turned-back clods had patches of oily brightness on their faces. The leaves in a neighboring bluff formed spots of cadmium; and even the big breaker plow, painted crude green and vermilion, did not seem out of place. It was a new implement, the best that Harding could buy, and two brawny red oxen hauled it along. Oxen are economical to feed and have some advantages in the first stages of breaking land, but Harding meant to change them for Clydesdale horses and experiment with mechanical traction. He used the old methods where they paid, but he believed in progress.

As he guided the slowly moving beasts and watched the clods roll back, his brown face was grave; for he had been troubled during the past seven days. When he looked up at Beatrice Mowbray on the river bank something strange and disturbing had happened to him. He was not given to indulgence in romantic sentiment and, absorbed as he had been, first by the necessity of providing for his sister and himself, and afterward by practical ambitions, he had seldom spared a thought to women. Marriage did not attract him. He felt no longing for close companionship or domestic comfort; indeed, he rather liked a certain amount of hardship. True, his heart had once or twice been mildly stirred by girls he had met. They were pretty and likable – otherwise he would not have been attracted, for his taste was good.

In some respects, Harding was primitive; but this, perhaps, tended to give him a clearer understanding of essential things, and he had a vague belief that he would some day meet the woman who was destined to be his true mate. What was more, he would recognize her when he saw her.

And when he had looked up at Beatrice in the moonlight, standing out, clear cut, against the somber background of poplars, the knowledge that she was the one woman had rushed over him, surging through him as strong as the swift-running river through which he had brought her. But, now that the thing had happened, he must grapple with a difficult situation. He knew his own value, and believed that he had abilities which would carry him far toward material success; but he also knew his limitations and the strength of the prejudices that would be arrayed against him. That he should hope to win this girl of patrician stock was, in a sense, ludicrous. Yet he had read courage in her, and steadfastness; if she loved him, she would not count too great any sacrifice she made for his sake. But this was only one side of the matter. Brought up as she had been, she might not stand the strain of such a life as his must be for a time. A deep tenderness awoke within him; he felt that she must be sheltered from all trouble and gently cared for.

Harding suddenly broke into a grim laugh. He was going much too fast – there was no reason to believe that the girl had given him a passing thought.

With a call to the oxen he went on with his plowing, and the work brought him encouragement. It was directly productive: next fall the prairie he ripped apart would be covered with ripening grain. He had found that no well-guided effort was lost: it bore fruit always – in his case, at the rate of twenty

bushels of wheat, or fifty bushels of oats, to the acre. When the seed was wisely sown the harvest followed; and Harding had steadily enlarged his crop. Now he had made his boldest venture; and he looked forward to the time when his labor should change the empty plain into a fertile field.

A jolt of the plow disturbed him, and as he looked up the oxen stopped. The share had struck hard ground. On one side, a sinuous line of trail, rutted by wheels and beaten firm by hoofs, seamed the prairie; on the other, the furrows ran across and blotted it out. It was a road the Allenwood settlers used, and Harding knew well what he was doing when he plowed into it. Still, the land was his and must produce its proper yield of grain, while to clear the trail with his implements would entail much useless labor. He had no wish to be aggressive, but if these people took his action as a challenge, the fault would be theirs. It was with a quiet, determined smile that he called to the oxen and held down the share.

At noon he turned the animals loose, and going back to camp, felt his heart throb as he saw Beatrice Mowbray talking to Hester. A team stood near by, and the boy he had met in the bluff was stooping down beside a light four-wheeled vehicle. Beatrice gave Harding a smile of recognition and went on talking, but her brother came up to him.

"The pole came loose," he explained; "and I thought you might lend me something to fasten it with."

"Certainly," Harding said, stooping to examine the damaged pole. "It won't fasten," he added. "It's broken between the iron straps, and there's not wood enough to bolt them on again."

Lance frowned.

"That's a nuisance!"

"I will give you a pole," Harding said. "There is some lumber here that will do."

He picked up a small birch log as he spoke, and, throwing it upon two trestles, set to work with an ax. When he had it about the right size, Lance interrupted him.

"That's good enough. I'll get it smoothed off when the carpenter comes out from the settlement."

"That is not my plan," Harding smiled. "I like to finish a job."

He adjusted a plane, and Beatrice watched him as he ran it along the pole. It had not struck her hitherto that one could admire the simple mechanical crafts, but she thought there was something fine in the prairie farmer's command of the tool. She noticed his easy poise as he swung to and fro, the rhythmic precision of his movements, and the accurate judgment he showed. As the thin shavings streamed across his wrist the rough log began to change its form, growing through gently tapered lines into symmetry. Though he had only his eye to guide him, Beatrice saw that he was skilfully striking the balance between strength and lightness, and it was a surprise to find elements of beauty in such a common object as a wagon-pole. She felt that Harding had taught her something when he turned to Lance, saying:

"There! I guess we can put that in."

The irons were soon refitted, and while Lance harnessed the team, Beatrice came to Harding with a smile.

"Thank you!" she said. "It's curious that you should help me out of a difficulty twice within a week."

Harding flushed.

"If you should happen to meet with another, I hope I'll be near," he returned.

"You like helping people?"

He pondered this longer than she thought it deserved.

"I believe I like straightening things out. It jars me to see any one in trouble when there's a way of getting over it; and I hate to see effort wasted and tools unfit for work."

"Efficiency is your ideal, then?"

"Yes. I don't know that it ever struck me before, but you have hit it. All the same, efficiency is hard to attain."

Beatrice looked at him curiously.

"I don't believe you are really a carpenter," she said.

"Unless you have plenty of money when you start breaking prairie, you have to be a number of things," he answered, smiling. "Difficulties keep cropping up, and they must be attacked."

"Without previous knowledge or technical training?"

He gave her a quick, appreciative glance.

"You have a knack of getting at the heart of things!" he said in his blunt way. "It's not common."

Beatrice laughed, but she felt mildly flattered. She liked men to treat her seriously; and so few of them did. Somehow she felt that Harding was an unusual man: his toil-roughened hands and his blunt manner of speech were at variance with the indefinite air of culture and good-breeding that hovered round him. There was strength, shown plainly; and she felt that he had ability – when confronted with a difficult problem he would find the best solution. It was interesting to lead him on; but she was to find him ready to go much farther than she desired.

"I hope making the new pole for us wasn't too much trouble," she said lightly.

"It gives me keen pleasure to be of any use to you," he said.

The color swept into Beatrice's face, for he was looking at her with an intent expression that made it impossible to take his remark lightly. She was angry with herself for feeling confused while he looked so cool.

"That sounds rather cheap," she replied with a touch of scorn.

"My excuse is that it's exactly what I felt."

Composure in difficult circumstances was one of the characteristics of her family, yet Beatrice felt at a loss. Harding, she thought, was not the man to yield to a passing impulse or transgress from unmeaning effrontery; but this made the shock worse.

Lance saved the situation by announcing that the team was ready.

As the buggy jolted away across the plain, Beatrice sat silent. She felt indignant, humiliated, in a sense; but thrilled in spite of this. The man's tone had been earnest and his gaze steadfast. He meant what he said. But he had taken an unwarrantable liberty. Nobody knew anything about him except that he was a working farmer. Her cheeks burned as she realized that she had, perhaps, been to blame in treating him too familiarly. Then her anger began to pass. After all, it was easy to forgive sincere admiration, and he was certainly a fine type – strong and handsome, clever with his hands, and, she thought, endowed with unusual mental power. There was something flattering in the thought that he had appreciated her. For all that, he must be given no opportunity for repeating the offense; he must be shown that there was a wide gulf between them.

Lance broke in upon her thoughts.

"I like that fellow," he said. "It's a pity he isn't more of our kind."

Beatrice pondered. Harding was not of their kind; but she did not feel sure that the difference was wholly in favor of the Allenwood settlers. This struck her as strange; as it was contrary to the opinions she had hitherto held.

"Why?" she asked carelessly.

"We might have seen something of him then."

"Can't you do so now, if you wish?"

"I'm not sure. It might not please the Colonel – you know his opinions."

Beatrice smiled, for she had often heard them dogmatically expressed.

"After all, what is there he could object to about Harding?" she asked.

"Not much in one sense; a good deal in another. You can't deny that the way one is brought up makes a difference. Perhaps the worst is that he's frankly out for money – farming for dollars."

"Aren't we?"

"Not now. We're farming for pleasure. But Kenwyne and one or two others think there'll have to be a change in that respect before long."

"Then we'll be in the same position as Harding, won't we?"

"I suppose so," Lance admitted. "But the Colonel won't see it; and I can't say that he's wrong."

"It seems rather complicated," Beatrice said dryly.

She was surprised to find herself ready to contend for Harding, and rather than inquire into the cause of this, she talked about Allenwood affairs until they reached home.

Harding, back at his plowing, was thinking of Beatrice. He knew that he had spoken rashly, but he did not regret it. She now knew what he thought of her, and could decide what course to take. He smiled as he imagined her determining that he must be dropped, for he believed the mood would soon pass. He did not mean to persecute the girl with unwelcome attentions, but it would not be easy to shake him off. He was tenacious and knew how to wait. Then, the difference between them was, after all, less wide than she probably imagined. Harding had kept strictly to his compact not to try to learn anything of his father's people in England; but, for all that, he believed himself to be the girl's equal by birth. That, however, was a point that could not be urged; and he had no wish to urge it. He was content to stand or fall by his own merits as a man; and if Beatrice was the girl he thought her, she would not let his being a working farmer stand in the way. This, of course, was taking it for granted that he could win her love. He was ready to fight against her relatives' opposition; but, even if he had the power, he would put no pressure on the girl. If he was the man she ought to marry, she would know.

A breeze got up, rounded clouds with silver edges gathered in the west, streaking the prairie with patches of indigo shadow, and the air grew cooler as the sun sank. The big oxen steadily plodded on, the dry grass crackled beneath the share as the clods rolled back, and by degrees Harding's mind grew tranquil – as generally happened when he was at work. He was doing something worth while in breaking virgin ground, in clearing a way for the advancing host that would people the wilderness, in roughing out a career for himself. Whatever his father's people were, his mother sprang from a stern, colonizing stock, and he heard and thrilled to the call for pioneers.

As the sun sank low, a man pulled up his horse at the end of the trail and beckoned Harding. There was something imperious in his attitude, as he sat with his hand on his hip, watching the farmer haughtily; and Harding easily guessed that it was Colonel Mowbray. He went on with his furrow, and only after he had driven the plow across the grass road did he stop.

"Are you Mr. Harding, the owner of this section?" demanded the head of Allenwood.

"Yes."

"Then I must express my surprise that you have broken up our trail."

"It was necessary. I dislike blocking a trail, but you can go round by the road."

"You can see that it's soft and boggy in wet weather."

"Five minutes' extra ride will take you over gravel soil inside the Allenwood range."

"Do you expect us to waste five minutes whenever we come this way?"

"My time is valuable, and if I let your trail stand it would cost me a good deal of extra labor. I must have a straight unbroken run for my machines."

"So, sooner than throw an implement out of gear while you cross the trail, you take this course! Do you consider it neighborly?"

Harding smiled. He remembered that in Manitoba any help the nearest farmer could supply had been willingly given. At Allenwood, he had been left alone. That did not trouble him; but he thought of Hester, enduring many discomforts in her rude, board shack while women surrounded by luxury lived so near.

"I can't see any reason why I should be neighborly," he replied.

Mowbray glanced at him with a hint of embarrassment.

"Have you any complaint against us?"

"None," said Harding coolly. "I only mentioned the matter because you did so."

He imagined that Mowbray was surprised by his reserve.

"You may be able to understand," the Colonel said, "that it's rash for an intruding stranger to set himself against local customs, not to speak of the discourtesy of the thing. When a new trail is made at Allenwood, every holder is glad to give all the land that's needed."

"Land doesn't seem to be worth as much to you as it is to me, judging from the way you work it. Every rod of mine must grow something. I don't play at farming."

Mowbray grew red in the face, but kept himself in hand.

"Do you wish to criticize our methods?" he demanded.

"I've nothing to do with your methods. It's my business to farm this section as well as it can be done. I've no wish to annoy your people; but you do not use the trail for hauling on, and I can't change my plans because they may interfere with your amusements."

"Very well," Mowbray answered coldly. "There is nothing more to be said."

He rode away and Harding started his oxen. It might have been more prudent to make a few concessions and conciliate the Colonel, but Harding could not bring himself to do so. It seemed a shabby course. It was better that the Allenwood settlers should know at the beginning how matters stood and of what type their new neighbor was.

From all that Harding had learned of Colonel Mowbray, he felt that this stretch of grassland would not be turned into a glowing sea of wheat without more than one conflict between himself and the head of Allenwood.

CHAPTER V

THE SPENDTHRIFT

Kenwyne felt pleasantly languid as he lounged in a basket-chair after his evening meal. He had been back-setting land since daybreak. Holding the plow was an occupation almost unknown to the Allenwood settlers, who left all the rougher work to their hired men. Kenwyne, however, was of a practical turn of mind; and, having invested all his money in his farm, he meant to get some return. He occasionally enjoyed a run with the coyote hounds, or a day's shooting when the migrating geese and ducks rested among the sloos; but for the most part he stuck steadily to his work and, as he bought the latest implements, he was considered richer than he really was. Though thirty, he was unmarried; an elderly Scottish housekeeper looked after him.

One of the obstacles to Allenwood's progress was that the bachelors outnumbered the married men; and the difficulty seemed insuperable. The settlers belonged to an exclusive caste, and few young Englishwomen of education and refinement had shown themselves willing to face the hardships of the prairie life; though these were softened at Allenwood by many of the amenities of civilization. Moreover, it was known to the rasher youths, who occasionally felt tempted by the good looks of the daughters of the soil, that Colonel Mowbray sternly discountenanced anything of the nature of a *mésalliance*, and that the married women would deal even more strictly with the offenders. Broadwood, for example, had broken the settlement's traditions, and he and his Canadian wife had suffered.

While Kenwyne was reading an old newspaper, Gerald Mowbray sauntered in. He had a careless, genial manner that made him a favorite, but there was a hint of weakness in his face, and Kenwyne had never trusted him. It was known that he had been wild and extravagant; but at Allenwood that was not generally regarded as a grave drawback. They were charitable there; several of the younger men, who now made good settlers, had left England at their relatives' urgent request, after gaining undesirable notoriety.

Gerald selected a comfortable chair and passed his cigar-case to Kenwyne.

"They're good," he said. "I had them sent from Montreal."

"No, thanks," replied Kenwyne. "I've given up such extravagances, and stick to the labeled plug. I don't want to be officious, but it might be better if you did the same."

Gerald smiled.

"You're rather a sordid beggar, Ralph; but as that's often a sign of prosperity, it makes me hopeful. I want you to lend me two hundred pounds."

"Impossible!" said Kenwyne firmly.

"One hundred and fifty, then?"

"Equally out of the question. All I have is sunk in stock, and earmarked for next year's operations." Kenwyne paused and considered. He knew the chances were slight that the money would ever be returned; yet he respected Colonel Mowbray, and his loyalty extended to the family of the head of Allenwood. "Why do you want the money?" he asked.

"I suppose I'll have to tell you. It goes back to India – what you might call a 'debt of honor.' I borrowed the money in London to square it; and thought when I came to Canada I'd be too far away for the London fellow to put undue pressure on me. Oh, I meant to pay sometime, when I was ready; but the fellow transferred the debt to a man at Winnipeg, who has sent me a curt demand with an extortionate bill of expenses. Now I have to pay."

"I suppose you have been round the settlement?"

"Yes; but I haven't collected much. In fact, I'm afraid I'll have to pledge my farm."

"You can't do that. Our foundation covenant forbids a settler to alienate his land without the consent of a majority in the council, subject to the president's veto. Your father would certainly use his veto."

"Very true," Gerald agreed. "However, I don't propose to alienate my land – only to pawn it for a time."

"It's against the spirit of the deed."

"I've nothing to do with its spirit. The covenant should say what it means, and it merely states that a settler shall not sell to any person who's not a member of the colony. I'm not going to sell."

"You're going to do a dangerous thing," Kenwyne warned him.

"Then the remedy is for you to let me have a thousand dollars," Gerald said quickly.

"It is impossible; but I will try to raise five hundred. I suppose the Colonel does not know you have come to me?"

"I rely upon your not letting him know." Gerald smiled in that ingratiating way that won him many friends. "I'm deeply grateful, and you're a good sort, Ralph, though in some ways you differ from the rest of us. I don't know where you got your tradesman's spirit."

"It won't be so singular before long," Kenwyne answered with dry amusement. "Even now, Broadwood and one or two others –"

"Broadwood doesn't count. He married a girl of the soil."

"He loves her, and she makes him a good wife."

"Yes, but it was a mistake. You know our traditions."

Kenwyne laughed, and nodded toward the open window, through which they heard the sound of cheerful whistling approaching them along the trail.

"I suspect that's Broadwood now," he said.

"Well, I must be going. I will call for the check to-morrow."

Gerald left as Broadwood entered.

"I can guess what he wanted. He was at my place," Broadwood said, as he took the seat Gerald had vacated.

"Ah! I'll wager he didn't go away empty-handed," Kenwyne smiled.

"Perhaps I'm betraying a confidence in admitting it. Anyway, I felt that one ought to help him for the family's sake, lest he get into worse trouble; and I could afford the loan. Since I married I've been making some money. But I want to ask you about this Harding. What kind of fellow is he?"

"I like what I've seen of him. Why?"

"Effie has been talking about his sister. Seemed to think it was unkind to leave the girl alone – in want, perhaps, of odds and ends a woman could supply. I think she has made up her mind to go see her."

"I'm not sure that would meet with general approval. What did you say?"

"I seldom give my opinion on these matters," Broadwood answered with a laugh. "On the whole, I think Effie's right; and I suspect that knowing the thing won't please the others gives it a charm. After all, she hasn't much reason for respecting their prejudices. At first, they nearly drove us out of Allenwood."

"I'm glad you didn't go. Your wife is steadily gaining ground, and the others will be glad to copy her after a while."

"That's my idea; we'll have to work our land. Have you ever thought what the Colonel could do with his big block, if he had the capital?"

"*And the wish!*" said Kenwyne. "The obstacle is his point of view. Besides, all of it isn't really his: Mrs. Mowbray, Beatrice, and the boys have a share. Of course, his taking the lots as one gives him a solid vote in the council, and with the veto he has on certain points makes him an absolute ruler."

"So long as his family support him!"

"Can you imagine their doing the contrary?"

"I've thought the Colonel's position was least secure from an attack within," Broadwood answered thoughtfully. "It doesn't follow that a man's family is bound to agree with him. Gerald's a dark horse, and one can't predict what he'll do, except that it will be what suits himself. Lance is young and headstrong; and Beatrice has a mind of her own... But I really came to ask your opinion about this sketch of a new stable. I must buy another team."

They discussed the plan for the new building until it grew late and Broadwood went home.

The following day Gerald Mowbray left Allenwood for Winnipeg. It was a dismal, wet evening when he arrived; and Winnipeg was not an attractive city at that time. There were a few fine stores and offices on Main Street; Portage Avenue was laid out, and handsome buildings were rising here and there; but, for the most part, the frame houses had a dilapidated, squalid look. Rows of peddlers' shacks stretched back from the wooden station, the streets were unpaved, and the churned-up prairie soil lay in sticky clods upon the rude plank sidewalks. Dripping teams floundered heavily through the mire. Although the city was beginning to feel the stir of commercial activity, the dark corners were devoted to questionable amusements.

Gerald had supper at his hotel, and afterward found the time hang upon his hands. The general lounge was badly lighted, and its uncovered floor was smeared with gumbo mud from the boots of the wet men who slouched in to the bar. The door kept swinging open, letting in cold draughts; and Gerald could find nobody to talk to. He had not enough money to pay off his debt, but thought he had sufficient to enable him to make some compromise with his creditor, and so had determined to see what could be done. It was, however, impossible to spend the dismal evening at the hotel, and he knew where excitement might be found at a moderate cost – that is, if one were cautious and lucky.

Going out, he made his way toward a side street running down to the river, and noticed the keen glance an armed Northwest policeman gave him as he turned the corner. Gerald thought it a desirable spot to station the constable.

A ramshackle frame house down the street was glaringly illuminated, and Gerald, entering, found a number of men and one or two women in two gaudily furnished rooms. There was another room at the back where refreshments were dispensed without a license. For the most part, the men were young, brown-faced fellows who had spent the summer on the lonely plains; but a few had a hard and sinister look. The girls were pretty and stylishly dressed, but they had a predatory air.

In one corner of the room an exciting poker game seemed to be in progress. At the other end a roulette table was surrounded by a crowd of eager players. Gerald was fond of games of chance, and he saw ahead of him a pleasant evening. Leaning against the bar, he was merely an onlooker for a while. The glare of light and the air of excitement, the eager faces of the players and the click of the balls fascinated him.

He had not been drinking heavily; yet to his annoyance he felt a trifle unsteady when at last he strolled over to the roulette table. His first mistake was to take a five-dollar bill from the wallet which contained the money to pay his debt. More than one pair of greedy eyes saw the thick wad of paper currency; and from that moment Gerald was a marked man in the room.

In the gray hour preceding daybreak, when, sick and dizzy, Gerald stumbled back to his hotel, he found that he had only ten dollars remaining of the amount that had been entrusted to him to settle his debt. Ten dollars would not pay his hotel bill, even.

He woke about noon, his head aching severely. He could form no definite idea as to what was best to be done. One thing, however, was certain: No one at Allenwood must know how he had spent the preceding evening. His relatives had no reason for believing his conduct irreproachable, but so long as he did not thrust his failings upon their notice they ignored them. Then, the revelation of how he had lost the money given him would no doubt lead to his banishment from Allenwood; and except for a small allowance from his mother's English property, he had no resources. The survey he had been engaged upon was abandoned for a time, and he could find no other employment. He must hold on at Allenwood, trusting that something would turn up, and augmenting his income by

the small sums he might win from the younger men at cards. First of all, however, he must call upon his creditor; it was a disagreeable task, but one that could not be shirked.

CHAPTER VI

THE MORTGAGE BROKER

Davies sat at his desk sorting a bundle of papers. His office, a large room in a smart, new building, was elaborately furnished; but the furnishings spelled expense rather than taste. The walls were hung with maps of the Canadian territories, plans of new town sites, and photographs of buildings. Davies was one of a class that was, for a time, to exercise a far-reaching influence on the Western prairie. His business was to sell the new settlers land – which was seldom paid for on the spot; the agent being willing to take what he could get and leave the balance on mortgage. He also lent money to farmers who had suffered from bad seasons, or who rashly determined to extend their operations with borrowed capital.

Interest was then very high, and the scratch-farming generally practised was not productive. Crops on the half-worked soil suffered from drought and blight, and often ripened too late to escape the autumn frost; yet, in spite of these disadvantages, the influx of new settlers forced up the price of land. As a rule, the unfortunate farmer soon became indebted to local storekeepers as well as to the man from whom he had bought his holding. When he harvested a good crop, he paid off some arrears of interest, and perhaps kept a few dollars to go on with; but he seldom got out of debt, and so toiled on, living with stern frugality, while the money-lender pocketed his earnings. Shylock ran no risk, since the security was good and he could sell up the defaulter. For a time, many of the small homesteaders struggled with dire poverty, in spite of legislation intended to protect them; and it was not until a succession of good harvests and the gradual development of the country enabled them to break the yoke of the usurer that a tide of prosperity flowed across the plains.

Davies was an unfavorable specimen of his class. There were some land and mortgage agents who dealt fairly with their clients and even ran some risk in keeping them on their feet; but Davies was cunning, grasping, and pitiless.

When Gerald entered he gave him a curt nod, snapped a rubber band around the papers, placed them carefully in a pigeonhole in his desk, and then turned to his caller.

"Mr. Mowbray! I expected to see you sooner. Guess you have come to settle your account."

Gerald found it hard to keep his temper. He had an aristocratic contempt for all traders, and had, even in Canada, generally been treated with some deference.

"In the first place, I don't see what you have to do with this debt," he began. "I borrowed from parties in London, and I'm responsible to them."

"Here's my authority," Davies said, handing him a letter. "Whether the lender instructed me to collect the money for him, or made other arrangements doesn't matter to you. I can give you a receipt that will stand good as soon as you put up the money."

"Unfortunately, that is more than I can do."

Davies did not look surprised.

"What's your proposition?" he asked.

"I'll think over yours," Gerald answered as coolly as he could.

Davies studied him for a moment or two. Gerald's expression was supercilious, but his face did not indicate much strength of character. Besides, the only justification for arrogance that Davies recognized was the possession of money.

"You're the son of Colonel Mowbray of Allenwood, aren't you? Your people hold a good piece of land there."

"You seem to know all about me. I'd better warn you, however, that you won't find my relatives willing to pay my debts."

Davies smiled.

"I could try them. They might do something if I stated my claim."

This was what Gerald had feared, and he could not hide his alarm.

"It will save you trouble if you realize that you wouldn't get a dollar," he said hastily.

Davies was silent for a few moments. As a matter of fact, he was by no means anxious to be paid. Allenwood was isolated as yet, and the land accordingly not worth much, but the homesteads were unusually good and the advance of cultivation and settlement would largely increase their value. Davies wanted a hold on Allenwood which might be turned to advantage later, and he now saw an opportunity for getting it. Young Mowbray obviously objected to having his friends learn how he was situated, and this would make him easier to manage.

"Well," Davies said, "you have some land there, haven't you? What's the acreage, township, and range?"

Gerald named them, and Davies made some calculations on a piece of paper before he looked up.

"If I find this all right in the land register, I'll cancel your London debt, and take a mortgage on your holding," he said, handing Gerald the paper he had been writing on. "Here's an outline of the terms."

"The interest's extortionate!"

"If you think so, go round the town and see if you can find anybody who'll be more liberal. If not, you can come back to-morrow and we'll fix up the deal."

Davies felt safe in making the suggestion. He did not think Gerald had much business ability, and trusted to his reluctance to make his embarrassments known. Besides, the mortgage brokers had their hands full and were not all so confident of the rapid advance of settlement as Davies was. Indeed, there were men who declared that the country was being opened up too rapidly, and predicted a bad set-back.

Gerald left Davies' office with a faint hope of being able to find a safer way out of the difficulty. To give his land in pledge would be a violation of the covenant that bound the Allenwood settlers. It was an offense that his father and his neighbors could not forgive. He shrank from the dangerous course; but the day went by without his finding any escape, and the next morning he called on Davies and the mortgage was signed.

While Gerald was at Winnipeg, Mrs. Broadwood startled the settlement at Allenwood by calling on Harding's sister. The visit was prompted by sympathy for the lonely prairie girl; but, coupled with that, Mrs. Broadwood delighted in the feeling that all the Allenwood women would disapprove of her course. She was small and pretty, with plenty of determination and an exuberant cheerfulness which contact with her husband's friends had somewhat toned down; and there was about her an air of homely Western frankness that was charming.

When she reached Harding's camp, Hester sat sewing in the sun. The girl made a remarkably pretty picture, she thought, seated beside a pile of prairie hay, with a few purple asters springing up at her feet and, behind her, a ragged pine-tree drooping its branches to the ground. And over all the gold of sunshine.

"You look like a priestess of the sun!" Mrs. Broadwood greeted her, laughing.

Hester smiled in response.

"I'm sitting outside because it's rather damp and cold in the shack," she said. "As you see, our house isn't finished yet."

She rose as she spoke, and came forward, and Mrs. Broadwood looked at her admiringly. Hester was tall and naturally dignified, and her characteristic expression was grave composure. Besides, her visitor remarked the excellent taste and fit of her simple dress.

"I'm sure we're going to be friends," said Mrs. Broadwood.

"I hope so," Hester answered simply.

The visitor found a seat in the prairie hay, and sinking down in the soft grass, she breathed the smell of wild peppermint with delight. She noticed the hearth of parallel logs, with a big kerosene can, used as a washing boiler, hanging from a tripod at one end; the camp oven; the sawing frame; and the scented cedar shingles strewn about beside the framework of the house. All these things were familiar, for she was one of the pioneers.

"My!" she exclaimed. "This *is* nice! Makes me feel homesick."

"It must be a change from Allenwood," Hester answered with a smile.

"That's why I like it! I'm quite happy there; but this is the kind of place where I belong. Twice before I met my husband I helped make a new home on the plains, and this spot reminds me of the last time. We fixed camp by Stony Creek in early summer, when the grass was green and all the flowers were out. There were rows of the red prairie lilies. I never saw so many! – and I remember how the new birch leaves used to rustle in the bluff at night. Thinking of it somehow hurts me." She laughed prettily. "I'm what Tom calls a sentimentalist."

"So am I," said Hester; "so you needn't stop."

"Well, I remember everything about the night we put in our stakes – Sally baking bannocks, with the smoke going straight up; the loaded wagons in a row; the tired horses rolling in the grass; and the chunk of the boys' axes, chopping in the bluff. Though we'd been on the trail since sun-up, there was work for hours, bread to bake and clothes to wash; and when we went to sleep, a horse got his foot in a line and brought the tent down on us. It was all hard in those days, a hustle from dawn to dark; but now, when things are different, I sometimes want them back. But I needn't tell you – I guess you know!"

"Yes; I know," said Hester. "Perhaps it's the work we were born for."

She was silent for a few moments, looking far out over the prairie; then she asked abruptly:

"What are the Allenwood people like?"

"They're much the same as you and I, but they wear more frills, and when you rub against those who use the most starch you find them prickly. Then, they've some quaint notions that Walter Raleigh or Jacques Cartier must have brought over; but, taking them all round, they're a straight, clean crowd." She looked intently at Hester. "Somehow you make me feel that you belong to them."

Hester smiled. Mrs. Broadwood was impulsive and perhaps not always discreet, but Hester thought her true.

"I don't understand that," she replied. "Though I think my mother was a woman of unusual character, she came from the Michigan bush. My father was English, but he had only a small farm and didn't bring us up differently from our neighbors. Still, he had different ideas and bought a good many books. Craig and I read them all, and he would talk to us about them."

"Craig's your brother? I've seen him once or twice. Tell me about him."

Hester nodded toward the trail that wormed its way across the prairie. A girl was riding toward them.

"Beatrice Mowbray," Mrs. Broadwood said; "the best of them all at Allenwood, though sometimes she's not easy to get on with."

When Beatrice joined them, Mrs. Broadwood repeated her suggestion. She was frankly curious, and Hester was not unwilling to talk about her brother. Indeed, she made the story an interesting character sketch, and Beatrice listened quietly while she told how the lad was left with a patch of arid soil, and his mother and sister to provide for. Hester related how he braved his neighbors' disapproval of the innovations which they predicted would lead him to ruin, and by tenacity and boldness turned threatened failure into brilliant success. Then losing herself in her theme, she sketched the birth of greater ambitions, and the man's realization of his powers. Beatrice's eyes brightened with keen approval. She admired strength and daring, and Hester had drawn a striking picture of her brother.

When the visitors rose to go, Harding appeared. He had come, he explained, for an ox-chain clevis.

"I have another visit to make," Beatrice said, when he had helped her to mount. "The shortest way is across the ravine and there used to be a trail, unless you have plowed it up."

"No," he laughed; "I mean to improve that one. However, as it's not very good, and there's an awkward place, I'll show you the way down."

They left the camp together, and Harding was not pleased to notice no difference in the girl's attitude to him. He had not expected her to show embarrassment, but he would not have minded a dignified aloofness. It looked as if she had not thought it worth while to resent his boldness when they last met. For all that, it made his heart beat fast to be near her.

Beatrice glanced toward the dark-brown line of the fall plowing.

"Do you know what our people are saying about you? You haven't shown much regard for your neighbors' feelings."

"I'd try to respect their needs."

"Well, that is something. Still, the trail was at least convenient, and it had stood for a number of years."

"I'm afraid some more of the old landmarks will have to go. These are changing times."

"And I suppose there's satisfaction in feeling that you are leading the way?"

"I can't claim that," Harding answered with a smile. "As a matter of fact, we're following a plain trail; the fur-traders blazed it for us before the railroad came; and I dare say your father had broken ground at Allenwood when I was learning to harness a team."

"It doesn't seem to make you diffident. Now, I agree with my friends that there's a good deal to admire in the old order."

"That's so. All that's best in it will stay; you can't destroy it. In a way, it's a comforting thought because we can't stand still, and progress means a fight."

"And yet some people believe in throwing away the weapons our fathers have used and proved."

Harding laughed.

"When they're fine steel, that's foolish; but we might be allowed to rub off the rust and regrind them."

Beatrice liked his half-humorous manner, which she suspected covered a strong sincerity. Besides, she had asked for his opinions; he had not obtruded them. She gave him a quick glance of scrutiny as he led her horse down the steep, brush-encumbered trail into the ravine; and she admitted to herself that he improved on acquaintance. One got used to his rough clothes and his line of thought which differed so widely from the views held at Allenwood.

Yellow birch leaves shone about them, the pale-tinted stems were streaked with silver by the sinking sun, and the ravine was filled with heavy blue shadow. There was something strangely exhilarating in the light, glowing color and the sharp wind; and Beatrice felt her senses stirred. Then she noticed Harding's set lips and the concentrated look in his eyes. He seemed to be thinking earnestly and perhaps exercising some self-restraint. She suddenly recalled his presumption the last time they were together. She had not carried out her plan of avoiding him, but she thought it might be better to run no risk.

"I mustn't take you any farther," she said. "The trail is good up the other side."

"All right," he acquiesced. "Turn out at the big poplar."

He stood there in the sunset, his rough felt hat in his hand, the slanting rays playing through his fair hair, watching her until she and her horse coalesced with the blue shadows of the hillside.

It would not be easy to win her, he knew. First, there was the life she had led, in what a different environment from the rough, pioneer one that he had known! Then there were the prejudices of her relatives to consider. She must come to him happily, without one regret.

Harding sighed; but his jaws set determinedly. He had been taught, as a child, that the sweetest apples hang on the highest branches: they are not easy to reach, but, once secured, they are worth the having.

CHAPTER VII

AN ACCIDENT

With the help of men from the railroad settlement Harding finished his house and made it weather-proof before the frost struck deep into the soil. Plowing was now impossible, but there was much to be done. The inside of the dwelling had to be fitted up, and logs were needed for the stables he must build in the spring. Trees large enough for the purpose were scarce; and where coal is unobtainable, cutting wood for fuel keeps the settler busy during the rigorous winter. Harding might have simplified his task by buying sawed lumber, but the long railroad haulage made it expensive, and he never shrank from labor which led to economy. He was not a niggard, but he had ambitions and he saw that his money must be made productive if those ambitions were to be gratified.

He was coming home one evening with Devine, bringing a load of wood on his jumper-sled. It had been a bitter day, and the cold got keener as a leaden haze crept up across the plain. There was still a curious gray light, and objects in the immediate foreground stood out with harsh distinctness. The naked branches of the poplars on the edge of the ravine they skirted cut sharply against the sky, and the trail, which ran straight across the thin snow, was marked by a streak of dingy blue. The wind was fitful, but when it gathered strength the men bent their heads and shivered in their old deerskin jackets.

As the oxen plodded on, Devine looked round at the sled rather anxiously.

"Hadn't you better throw some of these logs off, Craig?" he suggested. "It's a heavy load, and I'm afraid there's a blizzard working up. We want to get home before it breaks."

"The oxen can haul them," Harding replied. "We'll get nothing done for the next few days, and we have our hands plumb full this winter."

"I used to think I was a bit of a hustler," Devine said, "but you sure have me beat."

"If I'm not mistaken, we'll get a lie-off to-morrow." Harding struck one of the oxen with his mittened hand. "Pull out, Bright, before you freeze!"

The big animals moved faster, and the tired men plodded on silently. There is no easy road to wealth on the wheatlands of the West; indeed, it is only by patient labor and stoic endurance that a competence can be attained. Devine and his comrade knew this by stern experience, and, half frozen as they were, they braced themselves for the effort of reaching home. They must adapt their pace to the oxen's, and it was not quick enough to keep them warm.

As they approached a bluff, Harding looked up.

"Somebody riding pretty fast!" he said.

A beat of hoofs, partly muffled by the snow, came down the bitter wind, and a few moments later a horseman appeared from behind the trees. He was indistinct in the gathering gloom, but seemed to be riding furiously, and Harding drew the oxen out of the trail.

"One of the Allenwood boys. Young Mowbray, isn't it?" said Devine.

The next moment Lance Mowbray dashed past them, scattering the snow. The horse was going at a frantic gallop, the rider's fur coat had blown open, his arms were tense, and his hands clenched on the bridle. His face was set, and he gazed fixedly ahead as if he did not see the men and the sledge.

"It's that wild brute of a range horse," Harding remarked. "Nearly bucked the boy off the last time he passed my place. Something in the bluff must have scared him; he has the bit in his teeth."

"Looks like it," Devine agreed. "Young Mowbray can ride, but I'm expecting trouble when he makes the timber."

They turned and stopped to watch, for the Allenwood trail ran down the side of the ravine among the trees not far away. Horse and rider rapidly grew indistinct and vanished over the edge of

the hollow. Then there was a dull thud and the beat of hoofs suddenly broke off. The deep silence that followed was ominous.

"Throw the load off, and bring the oxen!" cried Harding as he started to run along the trail.

He was breathless when he reached the edge of the declivity; but he saw nothing when he looked down. A blurred network of trunks and branches rose from the shadowy depths with a pale glimmer of snow beneath; that was all, and there was no sound except the wail of the rising wind. Plunging straight down through the timber, Harding made for a bend of the trail where there was a precipitous bank, and on reaching it he saw a big, dark object lying in the snow some distance beneath him. This was the horse; its rider could not be far away. When he scrambled down he found the boy lying limp and still, his fur cap fallen off and his coat torn away from his body. His face looked very white, his eyes were closed, and he did not answer when Harding spoke. Kneeling down, he saw that the lad was alive but unconscious. Nothing could be done until Devine arrived.

It was a relief when he heard the oxen stumbling through the brush. Presently Devine came running up, and after a glance at the boy turned and felt the horse.

"Stone dead! What's the matter with Mowbray?"

"Some ribs broken, I suspect," said Harding. "Bring the sled close up. We've got to take him home."

They laid Lance on the jumper, and Harding stripped off his own skin coat and wrapped it round the boy.

"The shock's perhaps the worst thing, and he feels cold."

Both had had some experience of accidents in a country where surgical assistance could seldom be obtained, and Devine nodded agreement.

"Guess we'll have trouble in hauling up the grade and getting to Allenwood before the blizzard, but we've got to make it."

The opposite slope was rough and steep, and the jumper too wide to pass easily between the trees. They had to lift it, and help the oxen here and there; but they struggled up and then found that their difficulties were not over when they reached the open plain. The wind had risen while they were in the hollow and was now blowing the dry snow about. It had grown dark and the trail was faint.

"Might be wiser to take him to your homestead," Devine suggested; "but they'll be able to look after him better at the Grange. Get a move on the beasts, Craig; we've no time to lose."

Harding urged the oxen, which stepped out briskly with their lighter load, but he had some difficulty in guiding them, though Devine went ahead to keep the trail. It was impossible to see any distance, and there was no landmark on the bare white level; the savage wind buffeted their smarting faces and filled their eyes with snow. The cold struck through Harding's unprotected body like a knife, but he went on stubbornly, keeping his eyes on Devine's half-distinguishable figure. He was sorry for the unconscious youngster, but he did not glance at him. This was a time when pity was best expressed in action.

They had gone about two miles when the blizzard broke upon them in a blinding cloud of snow and the cold suddenly increased. Though he wore a thick jacket, Harding felt as if his flesh had changed to ice; his hands were numb, and his feet seemed dead. He knew the risk he ran of being crippled by frostbite; but to take his coat back might cost Lance his life.

They had been struggling forward for a long time when Devine stopped and came back.

"We've been off the trail for the last ten minutes," he said. "Guess it's got snowed up."

It was a bald statement of an alarming situation. Their only guide had failed them, and unless they could soon find shelter all must perish. It might, perhaps, be possible to keep moving for another hour or two, and then they would sink down, exhausted, to freeze. Yet, having faced similar perils and escaped, they were not utterly dismayed.

"The long rise can't be very far off," Harding said hopefully. "If we could make it, there's a little coulée running down the other side. Then we ought to see the Grange lights when we strike the lake."

His voice was scarcely audible through the roar of the icy gale, but Devine caught a word or two and understood.

"Then," he shouted back, "you want to keep the wind on your left cheek!"

It was the only guide to the direction of the blast, for the snow whirled about them every way at once, and sight was useless amid the blinding haze. Feeling, however, to some extent remained, and although their faces were freezing into dangerous insensibility, so long as they kept their course one side was still a little more painful than the other. They struggled on, urging the jaded oxen, and dragging them by their heads where the drifts were deep. The snow seemed to thicken as they went. They could not see each other a yard or two apart, and the power that kept them on their feet was dying out of them. Both had been working hard since sunrise, and weary flesh and blood cannot long endure a furious wind when the thermometer falls to forty or fifty below. Nothing broke the surface of the plain except the blowing waves of snow that swirled across their course and beat into their faces. It seemed impossible that they could keep on. Hope had almost left them when Devine suddenly called out:

"It's surely rising ground!"

Harding imagined by the oxen's slower pace, and his own labored breathing, that his comrade was right, but the rise was gradual and extensive. They might wander across it without coming near the lake; but they could take no precautions and much must be left to chance.

"Get on!" he said curtly.

By the force of the wind which presently met them he thought they had reached the summit. Somewhere near them a watercourse started and ran down to the lake; but the men could not tell which way to turn, although they knew that the decision would be momentous. One way led to shelter, the other to death in the snowy wilds.

"Left and down!" Harding cried at a venture.

They trudged on, Devine a few paces in front picking out the trail, and Harding urging forward the snow-blinded oxen. They had not gone more than a few yards when Devine suddenly disappeared. There was a rush of loosened snow apparently falling into a hollow, and then his voice rose, hoarse but exultant.

"We've struck the coulée!"

He scrambled out and it was comparatively easy to follow the ravine downhill; and soon after they left it the surface grew unusually level, and no tufts of withered grass broke the snow.

"Looks like the lake," said Devine. "We'll be safe once we hit the other side."

Harding was nearly frozen, and he began to despair of ever reaching the Grange; but he roused himself from the lethargy into which he was sinking when a faint yellow glimmer shone through the swirling snow. It grew brighter, more lights appeared, and they toiled up to the front of a building. With some trouble Devine found the door and knocked.

It was opened in a few moments by Gerald Mowbray, who stood looking out in surprise.

Devine briefly explained.

"If it's likely to scare his mother, get her out of the way," he added. "We have to bring him in at once. Send somebody for the oxen, and show us where to go!"

"Wait a moment and I'll meet you," said Gerald, hastening into the house.

When he disappeared, Devine turned to Harding.

"Get hold! You don't want to shake him, but the coats will keep him pretty safe."

With some trouble they carried him in, passed through a vestibule, and came with shuffling steps into a large hall. It was well lighted, and so warm that Harding felt limp and dizzy from the sudden change of temperature. His skin burned, the blood rushed to his head, and he stopped for fear he should drop his burden. Gerald, it seemed, had not had time to warn the people in the hall, and Beatrice rose with a startled cry. One or two women sat with white faces, as if stupefied by alarm, and two or three men got up hurriedly. Harding indistinctly recognized Colonel Mowbray among them.

"Be quick! Get hold of him!" he called to the nearest.

He was replaced by two willing helpers, and, half dazed and not knowing what to do, he slackerly followed the others up the middle of the floor. All who were not needed stood watching them, for they made a striking group as they moved slowly forward, carrying what seemed to be a shapeless bundle of snowy furs. Devine was white from head to foot, a bulky figure in his shaggy coat and cap, though the bent forms of the other men partly concealed him; Harding came alone, walking unsteadily, with the snow falling off him in glistening powder, his face haggard, and his frost-split lips covered with congealed blood.

As the little group passed on, following Gerald, Harding suddenly reeled, and, clutching at the back of a chair, fell into it with a crash. After that he was not sure of anything until some one brought him a glass of wine, and soon afterward Devine came back with Gerald.

"My mother begs you will excuse her, but she'll thank you before you go," he said. "The Colonel hopes to see you shortly, but he's busy with Lance, and we're fortunate in having a man who should have been a doctor. Now if you'll come with me, I'll give you a change of clothes. Your oxen are in the stable."

"We can't stay," remonstrated Harding.

"It's impossible for you to go home."

"That's true," said Devine, touching Harding's arm. "Better get up, Craig, before the snow melts on you."

Gerald gave them clothes, and then, saying that he was needed, left them alone. After they had changed, Devine found his way to the stable to see if the oxen were any the worse, and Harding went back to the hall. A group of men and women were talking in low voices, but no one spoke to him, and he sat down in a corner, feeling awkward and uncomfortable in his borrowed garments. Evidently the Mowbrays had been entertaining some of their neighbors who, to judge by scraps of conversation he overheard, thought they would better take their leave but doubted if they could reach home. Harding knew that he could not do so, but he felt averse to accepting Mowbray's hospitality, and he feared that Hester would be anxious about his safety.

He was still sitting in the corner when Beatrice came up to him.

"I'm afraid you have been neglected, but you can understand that we are rather upset," she said.

"How is your brother?" Harding asked.

"Better than we thought at first. One of our friends has bandaged him. There are two ribs broken, but he declares he now feels fairly comfortable."

"I'm afraid he's exaggerating, but it's a good sign. Anyway, I'm glad to hear he's conscious."

"He was conscious before you brought him home. He says he tried to speak to you, but you didn't hear him."

"That's possible," Harding replied. "The trail wasn't very good – and we were busy."

Beatrice gave him a strange look.

"So one would imagine! There was probably no trail at all. Two of our friends who live half a mile off don't think they can get back. It's fortunate for us that you and your partner had the strength and courage –"

"What could we do?" Harding asked. "You wouldn't have expected us to leave him in the bluff?"

Beatrice's eyes sparkled, and a flush of color crept into her face. Harding thought she was wonderfully beautiful, and feared it was unwise to look at her lest he should make a fool of himself.

"I can't say that I wouldn't have expected you to give him your coat; but that was very fine of you," she said. "You must have known the risk you took. When you came in you looked worse than he did."

It struck Harding as significant that she should have noticed his appearance in the midst of her alarm; but it might not mean much, after all. Women were often more observant than men.

"Then I ought to have been ashamed. It was the shock we were afraid of. You see, after a bad accident there's often a collapse, and when one's in that state even moderate cold is dangerous."

"How do you know these things?" Beatrice asked.

"When you live as we do, you learn something about accidents," he answered.

Beatrice gave him a look that thrilled him.

"I promised Lance that I would not stay but a minute," she said; "but I will send Mr. Kenwyne to look after you." She added in a lower voice: "I have not attempted to thank you, but you must believe that we're very, very grateful."

Harding's eyes followed her across the room and lingered on her when she stopped a moment to speak with one of the neighbors. Kenwyne's voice at his elbow roused him.

"Colonel Mowbray expects you to remain here, but on the whole I think you'd better come with me," Kenwyne was saying. "They're naturally in some confusion, and my farm isn't very far. I think my team can make it."

Harding was glad to get away quietly, but he left a message that he hoped to call in the morning for his oxen and for news of Lance.

CHAPTER VIII

AN UNEXPECTED ESCAPE

On the morning after the accident Colonel Mowbray sat at breakfast with his wife and daughter. The gale had fallen in the night, and although the snow lay deep about the house, Gerald had already gone out with a hired man to see how the range horses, which were left loose in the winter, had fared during the storm. Lance was feverish, but there was nothing in his condition to cause anxiety, and he was in charge of a man whom some youthful escapade had prevented from obtaining a medical diploma. There were one or two others of his kind at Allenwood whose careers had been blighted by boyish folly. Breakfast had been well served, for everything went smoothly at the Grange; in spite of the low temperature outside, the room was comfortably warm, and the china and the table appointments showed artistic taste.

Colonel Mowbray looked thoughtfully stern.

"Perhaps it was as well Kenwyne took the Americans home last night," he remarked.

"You asked them to stay," Beatrice said, with more indignation than she cared to show; "and after what they did – "

Mowbray cut her short.

"I cannot deny that we are heavily in their debt, and I shall take the first opportunity for thanking them. In fact, if I can make any return in the shape of practical help, I shall be glad. All the same, to have had them here would have meant our putting them on a more intimate footing than might be wise."

Beatrice smiled, but said nothing. She respected her father, but the thought of his helping such a man as Harding was amusing.

"From what I've heard about Mr. Harding, I don't think he would have presumed upon it," Mrs. Mowbray replied. "Besides, it looks as if we owed Lance's life to him and his companion and I really don't see why you object to the man. Of course, it was tactless of him to plow up our trail, but he was within his rights."

Mowbray looked at her sharply. His wife was generally docile and seldom questioned his decisions, but she now and then showed an unexpected firmness.

"I don't object to him, personally. For that matter, I know very little about him, good or bad," he said; and his tone implied that he was not anxious to learn anything more. "It is rather what he stands for that I disapprove of."

"What does he stand for?"

"What foolish people sometimes call Progress – the taint of commercialism, purely utilitarian ideas; in short, all I've tried to keep Allenwood free from. Look at England! You know how the old friendly relations between landlord and tenant have been overthrown."

"I wonder whether they were always friendly?" Beatrice interposed.

"They ought to have been friendly, and in most of the instances I can think of they were. But what can one expect when a rich tradesman buys up a fine estate, and manages it on what he calls 'business lines'? This must mean putting the screw of a merciless competition upon the farmer. On the other hand, you see men with honored names living in extravagant luxury without a thought of their duty to their land, gambling on the Stock Exchange – even singing in music halls. The country's in a bad way when you read of its old aristocracy opening hat shops."

"But what are the poor people to do if they have no money?" Beatrice asked.

"The point is that they're being ruined by their own folly and the chaotic way things have been allowed to drift; but the other side of the picture's worse. When one thinks of wealth and poverty jostling each other in the towns; oppressive avarice and sullen discontent instead of helpful

cooperation! The community plundered by trusts! Industries wrecked by strikes! This is what comes of free competition and contempt for authority; and the false principle that a man must turn all his talents to the making of money is at the root of it all."

It was a favorite hobby of the Colonel's, and Mrs. Mowbray made no remark; but Beatrice was pleased to see that he had forgotten Harding.

"You would have made a good feudal baron," she said with a smile. "Your retainers wouldn't have had many real grievances, but you would always have been on the king's side."

"The first principle of all firm and successful government is that the king can do no wrong."

"We don't challenge it at Allenwood, and it really seems to work well," Beatrice answered lightly; and then, because Mowbray insisted on formal manners, she turned to her mother. "And now, with your permission, I had better go to Lance."

When she left them Mowbray frowned.

"There's another matter I want to talk about," he said. "I'm inclined to think we'll have to do away with the card tables when the younger people spend the evening with us."

"But you're fond of a game!"

"Yes. I'll confess that a close game of whist is one of my keenest pleasures, and if I finish two or three dollars to the good it adds to the zest. For all that, one must be consistent, and I've grounds for believing there has been too much high play of late. The offenders will have to be dealt with if I can find them out."

Mrs. Mowbray knew that her husband's first object was the good of the settlement, and that he would make any personal sacrifice to secure it.

"We can have music, or get up a dance instead," she suggested; and added anxiously: "You don't think that Gerald –"

"I'd have grave suspicions, only that he knows what to expect," Mowbray answered grimly. "Something might be learned from Lance, but it would not be fair to ask."

"He wouldn't tell," Mrs. Mowbray said stoutly, knowing her husband's sense of honor. "Do you think it's serious enough to be disturbed about?"

"I'm afraid so, although at the moment I can hardly judge. A game of cards in public, for strictly moderate points, or a small wager on a race, can do the boys no harm; but as soon as the stake gets large enough to be worth winning for itself, it leads to trouble; and systematic, secret gambling is a dangerous thing. As a matter of fact, I won't have it at Allenwood. At present I can do nothing but keep a careful watch."

An hour later Mrs. Mowbray was sitting with Lance, when word was brought her that Harding had called.

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