Bindloss Harold

A Prairie Courtship

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Содержание

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CHAPTER I
A COLD WELCOME

It was falling dusk and the long emigrant train was clattering, close-packed with its load of somewhat frowsy humanity, through the last of the pine forest which rolls westward north of the Great Lakes toward the wide, bare levels of Manitoba, when Alison Leigh stood on the platform of a lurching car. A bitter wind eddied about her, for it was early in the Canadian spring, and there were still shattered fangs of ice in the slacker pools of the rivers. Now and then a shower of cinders that rattled upon the roof whirled down about her and the jolting brass rail to which she clung was unpleasantly greasy, but the air was, at least, gloriously fresh out there and she shrank from the vitiated atmosphere of the stove-heated car. She had learned during the past few years that it is not wise for a young woman who must earn her living to be fastidious, but one has to face a good many unpleasantnesses when traveling Colonist in a crowded train.

A gray sky without a break in it hung low above the ragged spires of the pines; the river the track skirted, and presently

crossed upon a wooden bridge, shone in the gathering shadow with a wan, chill gleam; and the bare rocky ridges that flitted by now and then looked grim and forbidding. Indeed, it was a singularly desolate landscape, with no touch of human life in it, and Alison shivered as she gazed at it with a somewhat heavy heart and weary eyes. Her head ached from want of sleep and several days of continuous jolting; she was physically worn out, and her courage was slipping away from her. She knew that she would need the latter, for she was beginning to realize that it was a rather hazardous undertaking for a delicately brought up girl of twenty-four to set out to seek her fortune in western Canada.

Leaning upon the greasy rails, she recalled the events which had led her to decide on this course, or, to be more accurate, which had forced it on her. Until three years ago, she had led a sheltered life, and then her father, dying suddenly, had left his affairs involved. This she knew now had been the fault of her aspiring mother, who had spent his by no means large income in an attempt to win a prominent position in second-rate smart society, and had succeeded to the extent of marrying her other daughter well. The latter, however, had displayed very little eagerness to offer financial assistance in the crisis which had followed her father's death.

In the end Mrs. Leigh was found a scantily paid appointment as secretary of a woman's club, while Alison was left to shift for herself, and it came as a shock to the girl to discover that her few capabilities were apparently of no practical use to anybody.

She could paint and could play the violin indifferently well, but she had not the gift of imparting to others even the little she knew. A graceful manner and a nicely modulated voice appeared to possess no market value, and the unpalatable truth that nothing she had been taught was likely to prove more than a drawback in the struggle for existence was promptly forced on her.

She faced it with a certain courage, however, for her defects were the results of her upbringing and not inherent in her nature, and she forthwith sought a remedy. In spite of her mother's protests, her sister's husband was induced to send her for a few months' training to a business school, and when she left the latter there followed a three-years' experience which was in some respects as painful as it was varied.

Her handwriting did not please the crabbed scientist who first engaged her as amanuensis. Her second employer favored her with personal compliments which were worse to bear than his predecessor's sarcastic censure; and she had afterward drifted from occupation to occupation, sinking on each occasion a little lower in the social scale. In the meanwhile her prosperous sister's manner became steadily chillier; her few influential friends appeared desirous of forgetting her; and at last she formed the desperate resolution of going out to Canada. Nobody, however, objected to this, and her brother-in-law, who was engaged in commerce, sent her a very small check with significant readiness, and by some means secured her a position as typist and stenographer in the service of a business firm in Winnipeg.

For the last three days she had lived on canned fruit and crackers in the train, not because she liked that diet, but because the charges at the dining-stations were beyond her means. She had now five dollars and a few cents in her little shabby purse. That, however, did not much trouble her, for she would reach Winnipeg on the morrow, and she supposed that she would begin her new duties immediately. She was wondering with some misgivings what her employers would be like, when a girl of about her own age appeared in the doorway of the vestibule.

"Aren't you coming in? It's getting late, and I'm almost asleep," she said.

Alison turned, and with inward repugnance followed her into the long car. It was brilliantly lighted by big oil lamps, and it was undoubtedly warm, for there was a stove in the vestibule, but the frowsy odors that greeted her were almost overwhelming after the fresh night air. An aisle ran down the middle of the car, and already men and women and peevish children were retiring to rest. There was very little attempt at privacy, and a few wholly unabashed aliens were partially disrobing wherever they could find room for the operation. Some lay down upon boards pulled forward between two seats, some upon little platforms that let down by chains from the roof, and the car was filled with the complaining of tired children and a drowsy murmur of voices in many languages.

Alison sat down and glanced round at the passengers who had not yet retired. In one corner were three young Scandinavian

girls, fresh-faced and tow-haired, of innocent and wholesome appearance, going out, as they had unblushingly informed her in broken English, to look for husbands among the prairie farmers. She was afterward to learn that such marriages not infrequently turned out well. Opposite them sat a young Englishman with a hollow face and chest, who could not stand his native climate, and had been married, so Alison had heard, to the delicate girl beside him the day before he sailed. They were going to Brandon on the prairie, and had not the faintest notion what they would do when they got there.

Close by were a group of big, blonde Lithuanians, hardened by toil, in odoriferous garments; a black-haired Pole; a Jewess whose beauty had run to fatness; and her greasy, ferret-eyed husband. Farther on a burly Englishman, who had evidently laid in alcoholic refreshment farther back down the line, was crooning a maudlin song. There was, however, an interruption presently, for a man's head was thrust out from behind a curtain which hung between the roof and one of the platforms above.

"Let up!" he said.

The song rose a little louder in response, and a voice with a western intonation broke in.

"Throw a boot at the hog!"

"No, sir," replied the man above; "he might keep it; and I guess they're most used to heaving bottles where he comes from."

The words were followed by a scuffling sound which seemed to indicate that the speaker was fumbling about the shelf for

something, and then he added:

"This will have to do. Are you going to sleep down there, sonny?"

The Englishman paused to inform anybody who cared to listen that he would go to sleep when he wanted and that it would take a train-load of Canadians like the questioner, whose personal appearance he alluded to in vitriolic terms, to prevent him from singing when he desired; after which he resumed the maudlin ditty. Immediately there was a rustle of snapping leaves, as a volume of the detective literature that is commonly peddled on the trains went hurtling across the car. It struck the woodwork behind the singer with a vicious thud, and he stood up unsteadily.

"Now," he said, "I mean to show you what comes of insulting me."

He moved forward a pace or two, fell against a seat in an attempt to avoid a toddling child, and, grabbing at his disturber's platform, endeavored to clamber up to it. The chains rattled, and it seemed that the light boards were bodily coming down when he felt with one hand behind the curtain, part of which he rent from its fastenings. Then his hand reappeared clutching a stockinged foot, and a bronzed-faced man in shirt and trousers dropped from a neighboring resting-place.

"You get out!" thundered the Englishman. "Teach you to be civil when I've done with him. Gimme time, and I'll settle the lot of you, and the sausages" – he presumably meant the Lithuanians – "afterward."

The man above contrived to kick him in the face with his unembarrassed foot, but he held on persistently to the other, and a general fracas appeared imminent when the conductor strode into the car. The latter had very little in common with the average English railway guard, for he was a sharp-tongued, domineering autocrat, like most of his kind.

"Now," he demanded, "what's this circus about?"

The Englishman informed him that he had been insulted, and firmly intended to wipe it out in blood. The conductor looked at him with a faint grim smile.

"Go right back to your berth, and sleep it off," he advised.

He stood still, collectedly resolute, clothed with authority, and the Englishman hesitated. He had doubtless pluck enough, and his blood was up, but he had also the innate, ingrained capacity for obedience to duly constituted power, which is not as a rule a characteristic of the Westerner. Then the conductor spoke again:

"Get a move on! I'll dump you off into the bush if you try to make trouble here."

It proved sufficient. The singer let the captive foot go and turned away; and when the conductor left, peace had settled down upon the clattering car. The little incident had, however, an unpleasant effect on Alison, for this was not the kind of thing to which she had been accustomed. It was a moment or two before she turned to her companion.

"I shall be very glad to get off the train to-morrow, Milly – and I suppose you will be quite as pleased," she said.

The girl blushed. She was young and pretty in a homely fashion, and had informed Alison, who had made her acquaintance on the steamer, that she was to be married to a young Englishman on her arrival at Winnipeg.

"Yes," she replied; "Jim will be there waiting; I got a telegram at Montreal. It's four years since I've seen him."

The words were simple, but there was something in the speaker's voice and eyes which stirred Alison to half-conscious envy. It was not that marriage in the abstract had any attraction for her, for the thought of it rather jarred on her temperament, and it was, perhaps, not altogether astonishing that she had of late been brought into contact chiefly with the seamy side of the masculine character. Still, lonely and cast adrift as she was, she envied this girl who had somebody to take her troubles upon his shoulders and shelter her, and she was faintly stirred by her evident tenderness for the man.

"Four years!" she said reflectively. "It's a very long time."

"Oh," declared Milly, "it wouldn't matter if it had been a dozen now. He's the same – only a little handsomer in his last picture. Except for that, he hasn't changed a bit – I read you some of his letters on the steamer."

Alison could not help a smile. The girl's upbringing had clearly been very different from her own, and the extracts from Jim's letters had chiefly appealed to her sense of the ludicrous; but now she felt that his badly expressed devotion rang true, and her smile slowly faded. It must, she admitted, be something to know

that through the four years, which had apparently been ones of constant stress and toil, the man's affection had never wavered, and that his every effort had been inspired by the thought that the result of it would bring his sweetheart in England so much nearer him, until at last, as the time grew rapidly shorter, he had, as he said, worked half the night to make the rude prairie homestead more fit for her.

"I suppose he wasn't rich when he went out?"

"No," replied Milly. "Jim had nothing until an uncle died and left him three or four hundred pounds. When he came and told me of it I made him go."

"You made him go?" exclaimed Alison, wondering.

"Of course! There was no chance for him in England; I couldn't keep him, just to have him near me – always poor – and I knew that whatever he did in Canada he would be true to me. The poor boy had trouble. His first crop was frozen, and his plow oxen died – I think I told you he has a little farm three or four days' ride back from the railroad." The girl's face colored again. "I sold one or two things I had – a little gold watch and a locket – and sent him the money. I wouldn't tell him how I got it, but he said it saved him."

Alison sat silent for the next moment or two. She was touched by her companion's words and the tenderness in her eyes. Alison's upbringing had in some respects not been a good one, for she had been taught to shut her eyes to the realities of life, and to believe that the smooth things it had to offer were, though they

must now and then be schemed for, hers by right. It was only the last three years that had given her comprehension and sympathy, and in spite of the clearer insight she had gained during that time, it seemed strange to her that this girl with her homely prettiness and still more homely speech and manners should be capable of such unfaltering fidelity to the man she had sent to Canada, and still more strange that she should ever have inspired him with a passion which had given him power to break down, or endurance patiently to undermine, the barriers that stood between them. Alison had yet to learn a good deal about the capacities of the English rank and file, which become most manifest where they are given free scope in a new and fertile field.

"Well," she said, conscious of the lameness of the speech, "I believe you will be happy."

Milly smiled compassionately, as though this expression of opinion was quite superfluous; and then with a tact which Alison had scarcely expected she changed the subject.

"I've talked too much about myself. You told me you had something to do when you got to Winnipeg?"

"Yes," was the answer; "I'm to begin at once as correspondent in a big hardware business."

"You have no friends there?"

"No," replied Alison; "I haven't a friend in Canada, except, perhaps, one who married a western wheat-grower two or three years ago, and I'm not sure that she would be pleased to see me. As it happens, my mother was once or twice, I am afraid, a little

rude to her."

It was a rather inadequate description of the persecution of an inoffensive girl who had for a time been treated on a more or less friendly footing and made use of by a certain circle of suburban society interested in parochial philanthropy in which Mrs. Leigh had aspired to rule supreme. Florence Ashton had been tolerated, in spite of the fact that she earned her living, until an eloquent curate whose means were supposed to be ample happened to cast approving eyes on her, when pressure was judicially brought to bear. The girl had made a plucky fight, but the odds against her were overwhelmingly heavy, and the curate, it seemed, had not quite made up his mind. In any case, she was vanquished, and tactfully forced out of a guild which paid her a very small stipend for certain services; and eventually she married a Canadian who had come over on a brief visit to the old country. How Florence had managed it, Alison, who fancied that the phrase was in this case justifiable, did not exactly know, but she had reasons for believing that the girl had really liked the curate and would not readily forgive her mother.

"Well," said Milly, "if ever you want a friend you must come to Jim and me; and, after all, you may want one some day." She paused, and glanced at Alison critically. "Of course, so many girls have to work nowadays, but you don't look like it, somehow."

This was true. Although Alison's attire was a little faded and shabby, its fit was irreproachable, and nobody could have found

fault with the color scheme. She possessed, without being unduly conscious of it, an artistic taste and a natural grace of carriage which enabled her to wear almost anything so that it became her. In addition to this, she was, besides being attractive in face and feature, endued with a certain tranquillity of manner which suggested to the discerning that she had once held her own in high places. It was deceptive to this extent that, after all, the places had been only very moderately elevated.

"I'm afraid that's rather a drawback than anything else," she said in reference to Milly's last observation. "But it's a little while since you told me that you were sleepy."

They climbed up to two adjoining shelves they drew down from the roof, and though this entailed a rather undignified scramble, Alison wished that her companion had refrained from a confused giggle. Then they closed the curtains they had hired, and lay down, to sleep if possible, on the very thin mattresses the railway company supplies to Colonist passengers for a consideration. An attempt at disrobing would not have been advisable, but, after all, a large proportion of the occupants of the car were probably more or less addicted to sleeping in their clothes.

There was a change when Alison descended early in the morning, in order at least to dabble her hands and face in cold water, which would not have been possible a little later. Even first-class Pullman passengers have, as a rule, something to put up with if they desire to be clean, and Colonist travelers are not

expected to be endued with any particular sense of delicacy or seemliness. As a matter of fact, a good many of them have not the faintest idea of it. It was chiefly for this reason that Alison retired to the car platform after hasty ablutions, and, though it was very cold, she stayed there until the rest had risen.

The long train had run out of the forest in the night, and was now speeding over a vast white level which lay soft and quaggy in the sunshine, for the snow had lately gone. Here and there odd groves of birches went streaming by, but for the most part there were only leafless willow copses about the gleaming strips of water which she afterward learned were sloos. In between, the white waste ran back, bleached by the winter, to the far horizon. It looked strangely desolate, for there was scarcely a house on it, but, at least, the sun was shining, and it was the first brightness she had seen in the land of the clear skies.

Most of the passengers were partly dressed, for which she was thankful, when she went back into the car; and after one or two of them had kept her waiting she was at length permitted to set on the stove the tin kettle which was the joint property of herself and her companion. Then they made tea, and after eating the last of their crackers and emptying the fruit can, they set themselves to wait with as much patience as possible until the train reached Winnipeg.

The sun had disappeared, and a fine rain was falling when at last the long cars came clanking into the station amid the doleful tolling of the locomotive bell. Alison, stepping down from the

platform, noticed a man in a long fur coat and a wide soft hat running toward the car. Then there was a cry and an outbreak of strained laughter, and she saw him lift her companion down and hold her unabashed in his arms. After that Milly seized her by the shoulder.

"This is Jim," she announced. "Miss Alison Leigh. I told her that if ever she wanted a home out here she was to come to us."

The man, who had a pleasant, bronzed face, laughed and held out his hand.

"If you're a friend of Milly's we'll take you now," he said. "She ought to have one bridesmaid, anyway. Come along and stay with her until you get used to the country."

Milly blushed and giggled, but it was evident that she seconded the invitation, and once more Alison was touched. The offer was frank and spontaneous, and she fancied that the man meant it. She explained, however, that she was beginning work on the morrow; and Jim, giving her his address, presently turned away with Milly.

After that Alison felt very desolate as she stood alone amid the swarm of frowsy aliens who poured out from the train. The station was cold and sloppy; everything was strange and unfamiliar. There was a new intonation in the voices she heard, and even the dress of the citizens who scurried by her was different in details from that to which she had been accustomed. In the meanwhile Jim and Milly had disappeared, and as she had been told that the railroad people would take care of her baggage

until she produced her check, she decided to proceed at once to her employers' establishment and inform them of her arrival.

A man of whom she made inquiries gave her a few hasty directions, and walking out of the station she presently boarded a street-car and was carried through the city until she alighted in front of a big hardware store. Being sent to an office at the back of it she noticed that the smart clerk looked at her in a curious fashion when she asked for the manager by name.

"He's not here," he said. "Won't be back again."

Alison leaned against the counter with a sudden presage of disaster.

"How is that?" she asked.

"Company went under a few days ago. Creditors selling the stock up. I'm acting for the liquidator."

Alison felt physically dizzy, but she contrived to ask another question or two, and then went out, utterly cast down and desperate, into the steadily falling rain. She was alone in the big western city, with very little money in her purse and no idea as to what she should do.

She stood still for several minutes until she remembered having heard that accommodation of an elementary kind was provided in buildings near the station where emigrants just arrived could live for a time, at least, free of charge, though they must provide their own food. As she knew that every cent was precious now, she turned back on foot along the miry street.

CHAPTER II
MAVERICK THORNE

Alison slept soundly that night. The blow had been so heavy and unexpected that it had deadened her sensibility, and kindly nature had her way. Besides, the very hard berth she occupied was at least still, and she was not kept awake by the distressful vibration that had disturbed her in the Colonist car. Awakening refreshed in the morning, she sallied out to purchase provisions for the day, and was unpleasantly astonished at the cost of them. She had yet to learn that a dollar goes a very little way in a country where rents and wages are high.

Returning to the emigrant quarters which were provided with a cooking-stove, she made a frugal breakfast, and then after a conversation with an official who gave her all the information in his power, she spent the day offering her services at stores and hotels and offices up and down the city. Nobody, however, seemed to want her. It was, she learned, a time of general bad trade, for the wheat harvest, on which that city largely depends, had failed the previous year.

Day followed day with much the same result, until Alison, who never looked back upon them afterward without a shiver, had at last parted with most of her slender stock of garments to one of the Jew dealers who then occupied a row of rickety wooden

shacks near the station at Winnipeg. He gave her remarkably little for them; and one night she sat down dejectedly in the emigrant quarters to grapple with the crisis. By and by a girl who had traveled in the same car and had spoken to her now and then sat down beside her.

"Nothing yet?" she asked.

"No," said Alison wearily; "I have heard of nothing that I could turn my hands to."

"Then," advised her companion, "you'll just have to do the same as the rest of us. You're almost as good-looking as I am." She lowered her voice a little. "I dare say you have noticed that those Norwegians have gone?"

Alison had noticed that, and also that two or three lean and wiry men with faces almost blackened by exposure to the frost had been hanging about the emigrant quarters for a day or two preceding the disappearance of the girls. The blood crept into her cheeks as she remembered it, but her companion laughed, somewhat harshly.

"Oh," she explained, "they're married and gone off to farm; but what I want to tell you is that I'm going to follow their example to-morrow. It's quite straight. We're to be married in the morning. He says he's got a nice house, and he looks as if he'd treat me decently." She laid her hand on Alison's arm, and seemed to hesitate. "A neighbor, another farmer, came in with him – and he hasn't found anybody yet."

Alison shrank from her, white in face now, with an almost

intolerable sense of disgust, but in another moment or two the blood surged into her cheeks, and her companion made a half-ashamed gesture.

"Oh, well," she said, "I think you're foolish, but I won't say any more about it. Besides, I had only a minute or two. Charley's waiting in the street for me now."

She withdrew somewhat hastily, and Alison sat still, almost too troubled to be capable of indignation, forcing herself to think. One thing was becoming clear; she must escape from Winnipeg before the unpleasant suggestion was made to her again, perhaps by some man in person, and go on farther West. After all, she had one friend, the one her mother had persecuted, living somewhere within reach of a station which she had discovered was situated about three hundred miles down the line, and Florence might take her in, for a time at least. She decided to set out and try to find her the next day. Rising with sudden determination, she walked across to the station to make inquiries about the train, and as she reached it a man strode up to her. It was evident that he meant to speak, and as there was just then no official to whom she could appeal, she drew herself up and faced him resolutely. He was a young man, neatly dressed in store clothes, though he did not look like an inhabitant of the city, and he had what she could not help admitting was a pleasant expression.

"You're Miss Leigh," he said, taking off his wide gray hat, and his intonation betrayed him to be an Englishman.

"How did you learn my name?" Alison asked chillingly.

"I made inquiries," he confessed. "The fact is, I asked Miss Carstairs to get me an introduction, and to tell the truth I wasn't very much astonished when she said you wouldn't hear of it."

Alison recognized now that the man was the one her companion had alluded to as her prospective husband's neighbor, and for a moment she felt that she could have struck him. That feeling, however, passed. There was a hint of deference in his attitude; he met the one indignant glance she flashed at him, which was somehow reassuring, and since she could not run away ignominiously she stood her ground.

"That's why I thought I'd make an attempt to plead my cause in person," he added.

"What do you want?" Alison asked in desperation, though she was quite aware that this was giving him a lead.

The man's gesture seemed to beseech her forbearance.

"I'm afraid it will sound rather alarming, but in the first place I'd better – clear the ground. The plain truth is that I want a wife."

"Oh," cried Alison, "how dare you say this to me!"

"Well," he answered quietly, "the fact that I expected you to look at it in that way was one of the things that influenced me. A self-respecting girl with any delicacy of feeling would naturally resent it; but I'm not sure yet that it's altogether an insult I'm offering you. Let me own that I've been here some little time, and that I've spent a good deal of it in watching you." He raised his hand as he saw the indignation in her eyes. "Give me a minute or two, and then if you think it justified you can be angry. I want to

say just this. We live in a pretty primitive fashion on our hundred-and-sixty-acre holdings out on the prairie, and conventions don't count for much with us. What is more to the purpose, we are forced to make some irregular venture of this kind if we think of marrying. Now, I have a comparatively decent place about two hundred miles from here, and my wife would not have to work as hard as you would certainly have to do in a hotel or store. That's to begin with. To go on, I don't think I've ever been unkind to any one or any thing, and, though it must seem a horrible piece of assurance, I said the day I saw you get out of the train that you were the girl for me. I would do what I could, everything I could, to make things smooth for you."

Alison felt that, strange as it seemed, she could believe him. The man did not look as if he would be unkind to any one. What was more, he was apparently a man of some education.

"Now," he added, "what I should like to do is this. I'd find you quarters in a decent boarding-house, and just call and take you round to show you the city for an hour or two each afternoon. I'd try to satisfy you as to – we'll say my mode of life and character, and you could, perhaps, form some idea of me. I don't want to form any idea of you – I've done that already. Then if my offer appears as repugnant as I'm afraid it does now, I'd try to take my dismissal in good part; and I think I could find you a post in a creamery on the prairie, if you would care for it."

He broke off, and Alison wondered at herself while he stood watching her anxiously. Her anger and disgust had gone. She

could see the ludicrous aspect of the situation, but that was not her clearest impression, for she felt that this most unconventional stranger was, after all, a man one could have confidence in. Still, she had not the least intention of marrying him.

"Thank you," she said quietly. "What you suggest is, however, quite out of the question."

The man's face fell, and she felt, extraordinary as it seemed, almost sorry that she had been compelled to hurt him; but once more he took off his soft hat.

"Well," he said, "I suppose I must accept that, and – though I don't know if it's a compliment – I shall go back alone. There's just another matter. If you have any knowledge of business I could have you made clerk at the creamery."

Urgent as her need was, Alison would not entertain the proposal. She felt that it would be equally impossible to accept a favor from or to live near him.

"No," she replied; "it is generous of you, but I am going West to-morrow."

The man, saying nothing further, turned away, and she thought of him long afterward with a feeling of half-amused good-will. It was the first offer of marriage she had ever had, made in a deserted, half-lighted station by a man to whom she had never spoken until that evening. She was to learn, however, that the strangeness of any event naturally depends very largely on what one has been accustomed to, and that one meets with many things which at least appear remarkable when one ventures out of the

beaten track.

She went on with the west-bound train the next afternoon, and early in the morning alighted at a wayside station which consisted of one wooden shanty and a big water-tank. A cluster of little frame houses stood beneath the huge bulk of two grain elevators beyond the unfenced track, which ran straight as the crow flies across a bare, white waste of prairie. As the train sped out along this and grew smaller and smaller Alison stood forlornly beside the half-empty trunk which contained the remnant of her few possessions. She had then just two dollars in her pocket. It was a raw, cold morning, for spring was unusually late that year, and a bitter wind swept across the desolate waste. In a minute or two the station-agent came out of the shanty and looked at her with obvious curiosity.

"I guess you've got off at the right place?" he said in a manner which made the words seem less of a statement than an inquiry.

Alison asked him if he knew a Mr. Hunter who lived near Graham's Bluff, and how it was possible to reach his homestead.

"I know Hunter, but the Bluff is quite a way from here," the man replied. "The boys drive in now and then, and a freighter goes through with a wagon about once a fortnight."

He saw the girl's face fall, and added, as though something had suddenly struck him:

"There's a man in the settlement who said he was going that way to-day or to-morrow, and it's quite likely that he'd drive you over. Guess you had better ask for Maverick Thorne at the hotel."

Alison thanked him and, crossing the track, made for the rude frame building he indicated. Her thin boots were very muddy before she reached it, for there was no semblance of a street and the space between the houses and elevators was torn up and deeply rutted by wagon wheels. She now understood why a high plank sidewalk usually ran, as she had noticed, along the front of the buildings in the smaller prairie towns.

It was with a good deal of diffidence that she walked into the hotel and entered a long and very barely furnished room which just then was occupied by a group of men.

Several of them wore ordinary city clothes and were, she supposed, clerks or storekeepers in the little town; but the rest had weather-darkened faces and their garments were flecked with sun-dried mire and stained with soil, while the dilapidated skin coats thrown down here and there evidently belonged to them. Some were just finishing breakfast and the others stood lighting their pipes about a big rusty stove. The place reeked of the smell of cooking and tobacco smoke, and looked very comfortless with its uncovered walls and roughly boarded floor. There was, however, no bar in it, and it was consoling to see a very neat maid gathering up the plates.

"Is Mr. Maverick Thorne here just now?" she asked the girl.

She was unpleasantly conscious that the men had gazed at her with some astonishment when she walked in, and it was clear that they had heard her inquiry, because several of them smiled.

"Quit talking, Mavy. Here's a lady asking for you," said one,

and a man who had been surrounded by a laughing group moved toward her.

She glanced at him apprehensively, for after her recent experience she was signally shy of seeking a favor from any of his kind. He was a tall man, bronzed and somewhat lean, as most of the inhabitants of the prairie seemed to be, and the state of his attire was not calculated to impress a stranger in his favor. His long boots were caked with mire and the fur was coming off the battered cap he held in one hand; his blue duck trousers were rent at one knee and a very old jacket hung over his coarse blue shirt. Still, his face was reassuring and he had whimsical brown eyes.

"Mr. Thorne?" she said.

The man made her a respectful inclination, which was not what she had expected.

"At your command," he replied.

She stood silent a moment or two, hesitating, and he watched her unobtrusively. He saw a jaded girl in a badly creased and somewhat shabby dress who nevertheless had an air of refinement about her which he immediately recognized. Her face was delicately pretty and cleanly cut, though it was weary and a little anxious then, and she had fine hazel eyes. Still, the red-lipped mouth was somehow determined and there was a hint of decision of character in the way she looked at him from under straight-drawn brows. Her hair, as much as he could see of it, was neither brown nor golden, but of a shade between, and he decided that the contrast between the warm color in her cheeks

and the creamy whiteness of the rest of her face was a little more marked than usual, as indeed it was, for Alison was troubled with a very natural embarrassment just then.

"I want to go to Graham's Bluff," she said. "The man at the station told me that you were driving there."

He did not answer immediately, and she awaited his reply in tense anxiety. It was evident that she could not stay where she was, even if she had been possessed of the means to pay for such rude accommodation as the place provided, which was not the case. In the meanwhile it occurred to the man that she looked very forlorn in the big, bare room, and something in her expression appealed to him. He was, as it happened, a compassionate person.

"Well," he replied, "I could take you, though as I've a round to make it will be quite a long drive. I had thought of starting this afternoon, but we had perhaps better get off in the next hour or so."

He turned to the girl who was gathering up the plates.

"Won't you try to get this lady some breakfast, Kristine?"

The girl said that she would see what she could do, but Alison was not aware until afterward that it was only due to the fact that the man was a favorite in the place that food was presently set before her. The average Westerner gets through his breakfast in about ten minutes; and as a rule the traveler who arrives at a prairie hotel a few minutes after a meal is over must wait with what patience he can command until the next is ready.

In any case, Alison was astonished when porridge and maple syrup, a thin hard steak and a great bowl of potatoes, besides strong green tea and a dish of desiccated apricots stewed down to pulp, were laid in front of her. It was most unlike an English breakfast, but she was to learn that there is very little difference between any of the three daily meals served in that country. Its inhabitants, who rise for the most part at sunup, do not require to be tempted by dainties, which is fortunate, since they could not by any means obtain them, and in a land where the liquor prohibition laws are generally applied and men work twelve and fourteen hours daily, morning appetizers are quite unnecessary.

In the meanwhile Thorne and his companions had disappeared, for which Alison was thankful, though they left an acrid reek of tobacco smoke behind them; but when Kristine presently demanded fifty cents she realized with a fresh pang of anxiety that she had now just a dollar and a half in her possession, and she scarcely dared contemplate what might happen if Florence Hunter should not be disposed to welcome her. Besides this, there was the unpleasant possibility that the man might expect more than she could pay him for driving her to Graham's Bluff, and it was with some misgivings that she rose when he appeared an hour later to intimate that the team was ready.

Going out with him she saw two rough-coated horses apparently endeavoring to kick in the front of a high, four-wheeled vehicle, until they desisted and backed it violently

into the side of the hotel. There are various rigs, as they term them – buckboards, sulkies and the humble bob-sleds – in use in that country, but the favorite one is the narrow, general-purpose wagon mounted on tall slender wheels, which will carry a moderate load though light enough to go reasonably fast.

Thorne helped Alison up, and as he swung himself into the vehicle several loungers hurled laughing questions at him.

"Aren't you going to trade that man the gramophone? You'd get him sure in half an hour," called one.

"Webster wants a tonic that will fix his wooden leg," cried another; and a third suggested that a Chinaman in the vicinity was open to purchase some hair-restorer. Alison did not know then that, probably because he wears only one tail of it, a Chinaman's hair usually grows without the least assistance three feet long.

Thorne smiled at them and then, calling to Kristine, who was standing near the door, he leaned down and handed her a bottle which he took from an open case.

"I guess you haven't much use for anything of this kind, but that elixir will make your cheeks bloom like peaches if you rub it in," he informed her. "I sold some round Stanbury down the line not long ago and there wasn't an unmarried girl near the place when I next came along."

"There was only two before, and one of them was cross-eyed," said a grinning man.

Thorne, without answering this, told Alison to hold fast and flicked the horses with the whip. They plunged forward at a

mad gallop, scattering clods of half-dried mud, and the wagon bounced violently into and out of the ruts. It seemed to leap into the air when the wheels struck the rails as they crossed the track, and then Thorne's arms grew rigid and there was a further kicking and plunging as he pulled the team up outside the little station shed. A man who appeared from within condescended to hand Alison's light trunk up, which she did not know then was a very great favor, and in another moment or two they were flying out across the white waste of prairie.

It ran dead level, like a frozen sea, to where it met the crystalline blueness that hung over it, for the grasses which had lain for months in the grip of the iron frost shone in the sunlight a pale silvery gray. There was not a trail of smoke or a house on it, only here and there a formless blur that was in reality a bluff of straggling birches or a clump of willows, and, to complete the illusion, when Alison looked around by and by, the houses had sunk down beneath the rim and only the bulk of the wheat elevators rose up like island crags against the sky.

It was, however, warm at last, and a wonderful fresh breeze which had the quality of an elixir in it rippled the whitened grass. Alison felt her heart grow lighter. The vast plain was certainly desolate, but it had lost its forbidding grimness. It had no limit or boundary; one felt free out there and cares and apprehensions melted in the sunshine that flooded it. She began to understand why she had seen no pinched and pallid faces in this new land. Its inhabitants laughed whole-heartedly, looked one in the eyes,

and walked with a quick, jaunty swing. They seemed alert, self-confident, optimistic and quaintly whimsical. It was hard to believe there was not some nook in it that she could fill.

In the meanwhile she was becoming more reassured about her companion. She decided that his age was twenty-six and that he had a pleasant face. His eyes were clear and brown and steady, his nose and lips clearly cut, and there was a suggestive cleanness about his deeply bronzed skin which was the result of a simple and wholesome life led out in the wind and the sun. Alison was puzzled, however, by something in both his manner and his voice that hinted at a careful upbringing and intelligence. It certainly was not in keeping with his clothes or his profession, which was apparently that of a pedler. She had already noticed the nerve and coolness with which he controlled the half-broken team.

"I'm afraid you started before you were quite ready," she said at length.

The man laughed.

"I might have planted a gramophone on to one of the boys and a few bottles of general-purpose specifics among the rest. They are" – his eyes twinkled humorously – "quite harmless. Anyway, I've no doubt I can unload them on to somebody next time. So far, at least, I haven't any rivals in this neighborhood."

"Then you sell things?"

"Anything to anybody. If I haven't got what the buyer wants I promise to bring it next journey, or bewilder him with an oration until he gives me a dollar for something he has no possible use

for. That, however, isn't a thing you can do very frequently, which is why some folks in my profession fail disastrously. They can't realize that if you sell a man what he doesn't want too often he's apt to turn out with a club on the next occasion." He paused and sighed whimsically. "If I hadn't been troubled with a conscience I could have been running a store by now. That is, it must be added, if I had wanted to."

"You find a conscience handicaps you?" Alison inquired, for she was half amused and half interested in him.

"I'm afraid it does. For instance, I came across a man with a badly sprained wrist the other day and he offered me two dollars for anything that would cure it. Now it would have been singularly easy to have affixed a different label to my unrivaled peach-bloom cosmetic and have supplied him with a sure-to-heal embrocation. As it was, I got my supper at his place and recommended cold-water bandages. There was another man I cured of a broken leg, and I resisted the temptation to brace him up with hair-restorer."

"What remedy did you use for the broken leg?"

"Splints," said Thorne dryly, "after I'd set it."

"But isn't that a difficult thing? How did you know how to go about it?"

"Oh, I'd seen it done."

"On the prairie?"

"No," replied Thorne, with a rather curious smile; "in an Edinburgh hospital."

Something in his manner warned her that it might not be judicious to pursue her inquiries any further, though she was, without exactly knowing why, a little curious upon the point. It occurred to her that if he had been a patient in the hospital the injured man would in all probability not have been treated in his sight, while it seemed somewhat strange that he should now be peddling patent medicines in Canada had he been qualifying for his diploma. He, however, said nothing more, and they drove on in silence for a while.

CHAPTER III
THE CAMP IN THE BLUFF

They stopped in a thin grove of birches at midday for a meal which Thorne prepared, and it was late in the afternoon when Alison, who ached with the jolting, asked if Graham's Bluff was very much farther. It struck her that the fact that she had not made the inquiry earlier said a good deal for her companion's conversational powers.

"Oh, yes," he answered casually, "it's most of thirty miles."

Alison started with dismay.

"But – " she said and stopped, for it was evident that her misgivings could not very well be expressed.

"We're not going through to-night," Thorne explained. "The team have had about enough already, and there's a farmer ahead who'll take us in. If we reach the Bluff by to-morrow afternoon it will be as much as one could expect."

Alison did not care to ask whether the farmer was married, though as there seemed to be singularly few women in the country she was afraid that it was scarcely probable. There was, however, no doubt that she must face the unusual and somewhat embarrassing situation.

"I had no idea it was a two days' drive," she said.

"It's possible to get through in the same day if you start early,"

Thorne replied. "I've a call to make, however, which is taking me a good many miles off the direct trail. Anyway, if you hadn't come with me you would have had to wait a week at the hotel."

"Do you know Mrs. Hunter?"

"Well," answered Thorne with a certain dryness, "we are certainly acquainted. When you use the other term in England it to some extent implies that you could be regarded as a friend of the person mentioned."

"I wonder whether you like her?" Alison was conscious that the speech was not a very judicious one.

Thorne's eyes twinkled in a way that she had noticed already.

"I must confess that I liked her better when she first came to Canada. She hadn't begun to remodel arrangements at her husband's homestead then. Hunter, I understand, came into some money shortly before he married her, and – " he paused with a little laugh – "most of my friends are poor."

This was not very definite, but it tended to confirm the misgivings concerning her reception which already troubled Alison. She noticed the tact with which the man had refrained from making any inquiries as to her business with Mrs. Hunter. Indeed, he said nothing for the next half-hour, and then, as they reached the crest of a low rise, he pointed to a cluster of what seemed to be ridiculously small buildings on the wide plain below.

"That's as far as we'll go to-night," he said.

The buildings rapidly grew into clearer shape, until Alison

recognized that one was a diminutive frame house which looked as though it had been made for dolls to live in. It rose abruptly from the prairie, without sheltering tree or fence or garden; but near it there was a pile of straw and two shapeless structures, which seemed to be composed of soil or sods. Behind them the vast sweep of silvery gray grass was broken by a narrow strip of ochre-tinted stubble.

Presently they reached the lonely homestead and a neatly dressed woman with hard, red hands and a worn face appeared in the doorway when Thorne helped Alison down. The girl felt sincerely pleased to see her.

"I've no doubt you'll take my companion, who's going on toward the Bluff to-morrow, in for the night and let me camp in the barn," said Thorne. "Is Tom anywhere around? I want to see him about a horse he talked of selling."

The woman said that he had gone off to borrow a team of oxen and would not be back until the next day, and then she led Alison into a little roughly match-boarded room with an uncovered floor and very little furniture except the big stove in the middle of it. A child was toddling about the floor and another, a very little girl, lay with a flushed face in a canvas chair. The woman asked Alison no questions, but set about getting supper ready, and after a while Thorne, who had apparently been putting up the team, came in. As he did so the child in the chair held out her hands to him.

"Candies, Mavy," she cried. "Got some candies for me?"

Thorne picked her up and sat down with her on his knee, and taking a parcel out of his pocket he unwrapped and handed some of its contents to her. While she munched the sweetmeats he glanced at her mother interrogatively.

"Yes," declared the woman, "I'm right glad you came. She's been like this three or four days. I don't know what to do with her, or what's the matter."

Thorne looked down at the child before he turned toward his hostess.

"Well," he said, "I have at least a notion. A little feverish, for one thing."

He asked a question or two, and then held the child out to her mother.

"Will you take her while I get a draught mixed? I'm not sure that she'll sit down again in her chair."

The child bore this out, for she would neither sit alone nor go to her mother.

"If Mavy goes out I sure go along with him," she persisted.

The man got rid of her with some difficulty and, going out to where his wagon stood, he came back with a little brass-strapped box in his hand. He asked for some water and disappeared into an adjoining room, out of which there presently rose the clink of glass and a slight rattling. Then he called the woman, who gave the child to Alison, and when she came back somewhat relieved in face she laid out the supper. It much resembled the breakfast Alison had made at the hotel, only that strips of untempting salt

pork were substituted for the hard steak.

An hour or two later she was given a very rude bunk filled with straw and a couple of blankets in an unoccupied room, and being tired out, she slept soundly. Lying still when she awakened early the next morning she heard the woman moving about the adjoining room until the outer door opened and a man whose voice she recognized as Thorne's came in.

"I'll go through and look at the kiddie, if I may," he said.

Alison heard him cross the room, and when he came back his hostess evidently walked toward the outer door of the house with him.

"You'll have to be careful of her for a few days, but if you give her the stuff I left as I told you, she'll cause you no trouble then," he said. "I'm sorry I didn't see Tom, but we'll have to get on after breakfast."

"What am I to give you for the medicine?" the woman asked.

Alison, who listened unabashed, heard Thorne's laugh.

"Breakfast," he answered; "that will put us square. I've been selling gramophones and little mirrors by the dozen right along the line, and when I've struck a streak of that kind I don't rob my friends."

Though she did not know exactly why, Alison had expected such an answer, and she remembered with a curious feeling that he had said his friends were poor. She heard the woman thank him, and then a flush crept into her face, for she certainly had not expected the next question.

"Are you going to quit the peddling and take up a quarter-section with the girl?"

"No," laughed Thorne; "I don't know where you got that idea."

"She's your kind," replied his hostess, and this appeared significant to Alison. "I've seen folks like her back in Montreal."

"It's quite likely," said Thorne. "She's going to Mrs. Hunter."

"Mrs. Hunter? Why didn't they send for her? What's her name?"

"I haven't a notion. She walked into Brown's hotel yesterday looking played out and anxious, and said somebody had told her I was going to the Bluff. As I felt sorry for her I started at once."

"Well," responded the woman, "I guess you couldn't help it. It's just the kind of thing you would do."

Thorne apparently went out after this and Alison lay still for a time while her hostess clattered about the room. She was troubled by what she had heard, for although she recognized that she had need of it, there was something unpleasant in the fact that she was indebted to this stranger's charity. He had confessed that he was sorry for her. Rising a little later she breakfasted with the others, and then, when Thorne went out to harness his team, she diffidently asked the woman what she owed her.

"Nothing," was the uncompromising reply.

"But – " Alison began, and the woman checked her.

"We're not running a hotel. You can stop right now."

Alison realized that expostulation would be useless, and this, as a matter of fact, was in one respect a relief to her, for just then

there were but two silver coins in her possession. A few minutes later Thorne helped her into the wagon and they drove away.

The prairie was flooded with sunlight, and it was no longer monotonously level. It stretched away before her in long, billowy rises, which dipped again to vast shallow hollows when the team plodded over the crest of them, and here and there little specks of flowers peeped out among the whitened grass or there was a faint sprinkling of tender green. The air was cool yet, and exhilarating as wine. Alison, refreshed by her sound sleep, rejoiced in it, and it was some time before she spoke to her companion.

"I felt slightly embarrassed," she said. "That woman would let me pay nothing for my entertainment. She can't have very much, either."

"She hasn't," replied Thorne. "Her husband had his crop hailed out last fall. Still, you see, that kind of thing is a custom of the country. They're a hospitable people, and, in a general way, when you are in need of a kindness, you're most likely to get it from people who are as hard up as you are." He paused with a whimsical smile. "One can't logically feel hurt at the other kind for standing aside or shutting their eyes, but when they proceed to point out that if you had only emulated their virtues you would be equally prosperous, it becomes exasperating, especially as it isn't true. So far as my observation goes, it isn't the practice of the stricter virtues that leads to riches."

"Why didn't you say your experience?" Alison inquired. "It's the usual word."

"It would suggest that I had tried the thing, and I'm afraid that I've only watched other people. To get knowledge that way is considerably easier. But I presume I was taking too much for granted in supposing that you had – any reason for agreeing with my previous observation."

Alison felt that this was a question delicately put, so that if it pleased her she could avoid a definite reply. She did not in the least resent it, and something urged her to take this stranger into her confidence.

"If you mean that I don't know what it is to be poor you are wrong," she confessed. "At the present moment I'm unpleasantly close to the end of my resources."

"But you said that you were going to Mrs. Hunter's."

"I don't know whether she will take me in. I shouldn't be astonished if she didn't."

The man saw the warmth in her face and looked at her thoughtfully.

"Well," he said, "you have courage, and that goes quite a way out here. I don't think you need be unduly anxious, in any case."

He flicked the team with his whip and by and by they reached a straggling birch bluff on the crest of a steeper slope. A rutted trail led between the trees, and as the team moved a little faster down the dip the wagon jolted sharply. Then one of the beasts stumbled, plunged, and recovered itself again, and Thorne, seizing Alison's arm as she was almost flung from her seat, pulled them up and swung himself down. Looking over the

side she saw him stoop and lift one of the horse's feet. It was a few minutes before he came back again.

"A badger hole," he explained. "Volador fell into it. An accident of that kind makes trouble now and then."

He drove slowly for the next few miles, but, so far as Alison noticed, the horse showed no sign of injury, and it was midday when they stopped for a meal beside a creek which wound through a deep hollow. On setting out again, however, the horse began to flag and Thorne, who got down once or twice in the meanwhile, was driving at a walking pace when they reached a birch bluff larger than the last one. He pulled the team up and springing to the ground looked at Alison a few minutes later.

"Volador's going very lame," he said. "It would be cruelty to drive him much farther."

Alison was conscious of a shock of dismay. Sitting in the wagon on the crest of the rise she could look down across the birches upon a vast sweep of prairie, and there was no sign of a house anywhere on it. It almost seemed as if she must spend the night in the bluff.

"What is to be done?" she asked.

"Can you ride?"

Alison said she had never tried, and the man's expression hinted that the expedient he had suggested was out of the question.

"Do you think you could walk sixteen miles?" he asked.

"I'm afraid I couldn't," Alison confessed, though if the feat had

appeared within her powers she would gladly have attempted it.

"Then you'll have to camp here in the wagon, though I can fix it up quite comfortably."

He held up his hand.

"You may as well get down, and we'll set about making supper."

She was glad that he spoke without any sign of diffidence or hesitation, which would have suggested that he expected her to be embarrassed by the situation, though this was undoubtedly the case. It seemed to her that his manner implied the possession of a certain amount of tact and delicacy. For all that, she looked out across the prairie with her face turned away from him when she reached the ground.

"Now," he said presently, handing down a big box, "if you will open that and fill the kettle at the creek down there among the trees, I'll bring some branches to make a fire."

She moved away with the kettle, and when she came back the horses had disappeared and she could hear the thud of her companion's ax some distance away in the bush. When he reappeared with an armful of dry branches she had laid out a frying-pan, an enameled plate or two, a bag of flour, a big piece of bacon, which, however, seemed to be termed pork in that country, and a paper package of desiccated apples. She was looking at them somewhat helplessly, for she knew very little about cooking. Thorne made a fire between two birches which he hewed down for the purpose, and laid several strips of pork

in the frying-pan, which she heard him call a spider. These he presently emptied out on to a plate laid near the fire, after which he poured some water into a basin partly filled with flour.

"Flapjacks are the usual standby in camp," he informed her. "If I'd known we would be held up here I'd have soaked those apples. Do you mind sprinkling this flour with a pinch or two of the yeast-powder in yonder tin, though it's a thing a sour-dough would never come down to."

"A sour-dough?" inquired Alison, doing as he requested.

"An old-timer," explained Thorne, who splashed himself rather freely as he proceeded to beat up the flour and water. "Sour-dough has much the same significance as unleavened bread, only that our pioneers kept on eating it more or less regularly in the land of promise. For all that, I wouldn't wish for better bread than the kind still made with a preparation of sour potatoes and boiled-down hops stirred in with the flour. In this operation, however, the great thing is to whip fast enough."

He splashed another white smear upon his jacket, and rubbed it with his hand before he poured some of the mixture into the hot spider, out of which he presently shook what appeared to be a very light pancake. Three or four more followed in quick succession, and then he poured water on to the green tea and handed Alison a plate containing two flapjacks and some pork. She found them palatable. Even the desiccated apples, which from want of soaking were somewhat leathery, did not come amiss, and the flavor of the wood smoke failed to spoil the strong

green tea. Then Thorne poured a little hot water over the plates, and as there was no vessel that would hold them, she overruled his objections when she volunteered to go down and wash them thoroughly in the creek. When she came back she found that he had made up a clear fire and spread out a blanket as a seat for her.

"You are satisfied now?" he asked.

Alison smiled. She was astonished to find herself so much at ease with him.

"Yes," she answered; "I felt that I could at least wash the plates. In a way, it wasn't altogether my fault that I could do nothing else. You see, I was never taught to cook."

"Isn't that rather a pity?" Thorne suggested.

"It's more," said Alison with what was in her case unusual warmth. "It's an injustice. Still, there are thousands of us brought up in that way yonder, and when some unexpected thing brings disaster we are left to wonder what use we are to anybody. I suppose," she added, "the answer must be – none."

Thorne expressed no opinion on this point, but presently took out his pipe.

"You won't mind?" he asked. "I suppose they taught you something?"

"Yes," answered Alison; "accomplishments. I can play and sing indifferently, and paint simple landscapes if there are no figures in them – because figures imply serious study. I can follow a French conversation if they don't speak fast, and read Italian with a dictionary. Before any of these things will bring a

girl in sixpence she must do them excellently, and they seem very unlikely to be of the least service in this part of Canada."

She was angry with herself for the outbreak as soon as she had spoken, as it seemed absurd that she should supply a stranger with these personal details; but the longing to utter some protest against the half-education which had been merely a handicap during the last three bitter years was too much for her. Thorne, however, made a sign of sympathetic comprehension.

"Yes," he assented, "that kind of thing's rather a pity. Did you never learn anything – practical?"

"Shorthand," replied Alison. "I can generally, though not always, read what I've written, if it hasn't exceeded about eighty words a minute. Then I can type about two-thirds as fast as one really ought to, and can keep simple accounts so long as neatness is not insisted on. I naturally had to learn all this after I left home. It seems to me that to bring up English girls in such a way is downright cruelty."

Thorne laughed.

"It's not remarkably different in our case. There's a man in a town not far along the line who used to shine at the Oxford Union and is now uncommonly glad to earn a few dollars by his talents as an auctioneer; that's how they estimate oratory on the prairie. There's another who devoted most of his time at Cambridge to physical culture, and as the result of it he gets pretty steady employment on the railroad track as a ballast shoveler."

Then he changed his tone.

"Have you any idea as to what you will do if you don't stay with Mrs. Hunter?"

"No," confessed Alison, somewhat ruefully.

"Well," said Thorne, "as I believe I mentioned, I don't think you need worry about the matter. It's very probable that some of the small wheat-growers' wives would be glad to have you."

"But I can't even sew decently."

The man's eyes twinkled.

"In a general way, they're too busy to be fastidious."

There was silence for a little after this and Alison cast one or two swift unobtrusive glances at her companion, who lay smoking opposite her on the other side of the fire. The sun now hung low above the great white waste and the red light streamed in upon them both between the leafless birches. Again she decided that he had a pleasant face and, what was more, in spite of his attire, his whole personality seemed to suggest a clean and wholesome virility.

She had seen that he could be gentle, in the sick child's case, and she suspected that he could be generous, but there was something about him that also hinted at force. Then she remembered some of the men with whom she had been brought into unpleasant contact in the cities – many who bore the unmistakable mark of the beast, the cheap swagger of others, and the inane attempts at gallantries which some of the rest indulged in. They were not all like that, she realized; there were true men everywhere; but now that her first shrinking from the grim and

lonely land was lessening it seemed to her that it had, in some respects at least, a more bracing influence on those who lived in it than that other still very dear one on which she had turned her back. Then she realized that she was, after all, appraising its inhabitants by a single specimen. She had yet to learn that they are now and then a little too aggressively proud of themselves in western Canada, though it must be said that the boaster is usually ready to pour out the sweat of tensest effort with ax and saw or ox-team to prove his vaunting warranted.

After a while the sun dipped and it grew chilly as dusk crept up from the hazy east across the leagues of grass. Thorne brought her another blanket to lay over her shoulders, and lying down again relighted his pipe. There was not a breath of wind, and though she could hear the knee-hobbled horses moving every now and then the silence became impressive. She felt impelled to break it presently, for it seemed to her that casual conversation would lessen the probability of the somewhat unusual situation having too marked an effect on either of them.

"How is it that you have so many provisions in your wagon?" she asked.

Thorne laughed.

"I live in it all summer."

"And you drive about selling things? Is it very remunerative?"

"No," admitted Thorne dryly; "I can't say that it is; but, you see, I like it. I'm afraid that I've a rooted objection to staying in one place very long, and while I can get a meal and the few things

I need by selling an odd bottle of cosmetic, a gramophone, or a mirror, I'm content." He made a humorous gesture. "That's the kind of man I am."

Then he stood up.

"It's getting rather late and you'll find the wagon fixed up ready. If you hear a doleful howling you needn't be alarmed. It will only be the coyotes."

He disappeared into the shadows and Alison turned away toward the wagon.

CHAPTER IV
THE FARQUHAR HOMESTEAD

When she reached the wagon Alison found it covered by a heavy waterproof sheet which was stretched across a pole. Loose hay had been strewn between a row of wooden cases and one side of the vehicle and the space beneath the sheeted roof was filled with a faint aromatic odor, which she afterward learned was the smell of the wild peppermint that grows in the prairie grass. When she had spread one blanket on the hay the couch felt seductively soft, and she sank into it contentedly. Tired as she was, however, she did not go to sleep immediately, for it was the first night she had ever spent in the open, and for a time the strangeness of her surroundings reacted on her.

The front of the tent was open, and resting on one elbow she could see the sinking fires still burning red among the leafless trees, and the pale wisps of smoke that drifted among their spectral stems. At the foot of the slope there was a wan gleam of water and beyond that in turn the prairie rolled away, vast and dim and shadowy, with a silver half-moon hanging low above its eastern rim. To one who had lived in the cities, as she had done, the silence was at first so deep as to be almost overwhelming, but by degrees she became conscious that it was broken by tiny sounds. There was a very faint, elfin tinkle of running water, a

whispering of grasses that bent to the little cold breeze which had just sprung up, and the softest, caressing rustle of the lace-like birch twigs. Then, as the moon rose higher the vast sweep of wilderness and sky gathered depth of color and became a wonderful nocturne in blue and silver.

In the meanwhile a pleasant warmth was creeping through her wearied body and she began to wonder with a sense of compunction how many blankets Thorne possessed, and where he was. It was at least certain that he was nowhere near the fire, for she had carefully satisfied herself on that point. Then a wild, drawn-out howl drifted up to her across the faintly gleaming prairie and she started and held her breath, until she remembered that Thorne had said there was no reason why she should be alarmed if she heard a coyote. He was, she felt, a man one could believe. The beast did not howl again, but she continued to think of her companion as her eyes grew heavy. There was no doubt that he had a pleasant voice and a handsome face. Then her eyes closed altogether and her yielding elbow slipped down among the hay.

The sun was where the moon had been when she opened her eyes again. Climbing down from the wagon she saw no sign of Thorne. A bucket filled with very cold water, however, stood beneath a tree, where she did not remember having noticed it on the previous evening, and a towel hung close by. A few minutes later she took down the towel and glanced at it dubiously. It was by no means overclean and she wondered with misgivings what

the man did with it. It seemed within the bounds of possibility that he dried the plates on it and, what was worse, that he might do so again. In the meanwhile, however, the hair on her forehead was dripping and the water was trickling down her neck, so she shut her eyes tight and applied the towel, after which she concealed it carefully in the wagon.

A quarter of an hour later Thorne appeared and she was relieved upon one point at least. Whether he had slept with blankets or without them, he did not look cold, and his appearance indeed suggested that he had been in the neighboring creek. She was astonished to notice that he had brushed himself carefully and had sewed up the rent in the knee of his overalls. Clothes-brushes, she correctly supposed, were scarce on the Canadian prairie, but it seemed probable that he would require a brush of some kind to clean his horses.

"If you wouldn't mind laying out breakfast I'll make a fire and catch the team," he said. "It's a glorious morning; but once the winter's over we have a good many of them here."

"Yes," assented Alison; "everything is so delightfully fresh."

His eyes rested on her for a moment and she was unpleasantly conscious that her dress was badly creased and crumpled as well as shabby; but he did not seem to notice this.

"That," he said, "is what struck me a minute or two ago."

He busied himself about the fire, and when he strode away through the bluff in search of the horses she heard him singing softly to himself. She recognized the aria, and wondered a little,

for it was not one that could be considered as popular music.

They had breakfast when he came back and both laughed when she prepared the flapjacks under his direction. She felt no restraint in this stranger's company. Indeed, she was conscious of a pleasant sense of camaraderie, which seemed the best name for it, though she had hired him to drive her to Mrs. Hunter's and was very uncertain as to whether she could pay him.

He harnessed the team when the meal was over and explained that although Volador was still lame they might contrive to reach Graham's Bluff at sundown by proceeding by easy stages, and Alison tactfully led him on to talk about himself as they drove away. Though there were one or two points on which he was reserved, he displayed very little diffidence, which, however, is a quality not often met with among the inhabitants of western Canada.

"Well," he said with an air of whimsical reflection in answer to one question, "I suppose my chief complaint is an excess of individuality. They beat it out of you with clubs in England, unless you're rich – really rich – when you can, of course, do anything. On the other hand, the man who is merely stodgily prosperous is hampered by more rules than anybody else. This is, I must explain, another notion I've arrived at by observation and not from experience."

"One supposes that a certain amount of uniformity and subordination is necessary to progress," commented Alison.

"Oh, yes," agreed Thorne; "that's the trouble. Progress

marches with massed battalions and makes so much dust that it's not always able to see where it's going. Perhaps it's that or the bewildering change of leaders that renders so much countermarching unavoidable."

"Then you prefer to act with the vedettes and skirmishers?"

"No," said Thorne; "not that exactly. Some of us are more like the camp-followers. We collect our toll on the booty and when that's too difficult we live on the country. After all, mine's an ancient if not a very respectable calling. There were always pilgrims, minstrels and pedlers."

"It can't be a luxurious life."

Thorne looked amused.

"Are you quite sure you didn't mean a useful one?"

Alison felt uncomfortable, because this idea had been in her mind.

"I'll answer the question, anyway," continued Thorne. "These people and those in the wheat-growing lands across the frontier work twelve and fourteen hours every day. It's always the same unceasing toil with them – they have no diversions. We go round and carry the news from place to place, tell them the latest stories, and now and then sing to them. We don't tax them too much either – a supper when they're poor – a dollar for a mirror or a bottle of elixir, which it must be confessed most of them have no possible use for."

"Did you never do anything else?" Alison inquired; "that is, in Canada?"

"Oh, yes," replied her companion. "I was clerk in an implement store which I walked out of at its proprietor's request after an attack of injudicious candor. You see, a rather big farmer came in one day and spent most of the morning examining our seeders and pointing out their defects. Then he inquired why we had the assurance to demand so much for our implement when he could buy a very much better one several dollars cheaper. I asked him if he was sure of that, and when he said he was I suggested that it would be considerably wiser to go right away and buy it instead of wasting his time and mine. The proprietor desired to know how we expected him to make a living if we talked to customers like that, and I pointed out that we couldn't do so anyway by answering insane questions."

Alison laughed delightedly. She felt that this was not mere rodomontade, but that the man was perfectly capable of doing as he had said.

"Had you any more experiences of the same kind?" she asked.

"I was shortly afterward projected out of a wheat broker's office."

"Projected?"

Thorne grinned.

"I believe that describes it. You see, they were three to one; but I took part of the office fittings along with me. I must own that I lost my temper and insulted them."

"But why did you do so?"

"Well," answered Thorne reflectively, "I like the Colonial, and

especially the Westerner, though he's rather fond of insisting on his superiority over the rest of mankind. One gets used to this, but it now and then grows galling when he compares himself with the folks who come out from the old country. On the day in question the trouble arose from a repetition of the usual formula that if it wasn't for the ocean they'd have the whole scum of Europe coming over. I, however, shook hands with the man who said it not long afterward, and he told me that after I had gone, which was how he expressed it, they sat down and laughed until they ached, thinking what the wheat broker, who was out on business, would say when he saw his office."

Alison was genuinely amused and she ventured another question.

"Did you leave your situations in England in the same fashion?"

The man's face darkened for a moment.

"As it happened, I hadn't any."

Alison turned the conversation into what promised to be a safer channel, and they drove along very slowly all morning. When they set out again after a lengthy stop at noon Thorne asked her if she would mind walking for a while, as Volador was becoming very lame. He added that he would make for an outlying homestead, where they would find entertainment, instead of Graham's Bluff, and that they should reach Mrs. Hunter's on the following day.

It was six o'clock in the evening when they arrived at a frame

house which stood, roofed with cedar shingles, in the shelter of a big birch bluff. There was a very rude sod-built stable, a small log barn, and a great pile of straw, which appeared to be hollow inside and used as a store of some kind. A middle-aged man with a good-humored look met them at the door, and his wife greeted Alison in a kindly fashion when Thorne explained the cause of their visit. Indeed, Alison was pleased with the woman's face and manner, though, like many of the small wheat-growers' wives, she looked a little worn and faded. Though the men toil strenuously on the newly broken prairie, the heavier burden not infrequently falls to the woman's share.

Farquhar, their host, went out to work after supper but came back a little before dusk, and when they sat out on the stoop together, Thorne got his banjo and sang twice at Mrs. Farquhar's request; once some amusing jingle he had heard in Winnipeg, and afterward "Mandalay."

The song was not new to Alison, but she fancied that she had never heard it rendered as Maverick Thorne sang it then. It was not his voice, though that was a fine one, but the knowledge that had given him power of expression, which held her tense and still. This man knew and had indulged in and probably suffered for the longing for something that was strange and different from all that his experience had touched before. He was one of the free-lances who could not sit snugly at home; and in her heart Alison sympathized with him.

She had never seen the glowing, sensuous East and South,

but the new West lay open before her in all its clean, pristine virility. A vast sweep of sky that was duskily purple eastward stretched overhead, a wonderful crystalline bluish green, until it changed far off on the grassland's rim to a streak of smoky red. Under it the prairie rolled back like a great silent sea. There was something that set the blood stirring in the dew-chilled air, and the faint smell of the wood smoke and the calling of the wild fowl on a distant sloo intensified the sense of the new and unfamiliar. One could be free in that wide land, she felt; and as she thought of the customs, castes, and conventions to which one must submit at home, she wondered whether they were needed guides and guards or mere cramping fetters. They seemed to have none of them in western Canada.

She said "Thank you!" when Thorne laid down his banjo, and felt that the spoken word had its limits, though she was careful not to look at him directly just then, and soon afterward she retired. This house was larger and much better furnished than the one she had last slept in, though she supposed that it would have looked singularly comfortless and almost empty in England. There was, for one thing, neither a curtain at a window nor a carpet on the floor.

When she joined the others at breakfast the next morning her host informed Thorne that if they could wait until noon he could lend him a horse to replace the lame Volador. He had, he explained, sent his hired man off with a team on the previous day for a plow which was being repaired by a smith who lived

at a distance, and he had some work for the second pair that morning. The men went out together when breakfast was over, and Mrs. Farquhar sat down opposite Alison after she had cleared the table.

"Thorne tells me you are going to Mrs. Hunter's, though you don't know yet whether you will stay with her or not," she said.

It occurred to Alison that this was a tactful way of expressing it, though she was not sure that the delicacy was altogether Thorne's, for she had no doubt that her hostess had once been accustomed to a much smoother life in the Canadian cities.

"No," she replied, "I really can't tell until I get there."

"Then, in case you don't decide to stay, we should be glad to have you here."

Alison was astonished, but in spite of her usual outward calm there was a vein of impulsiveness in her, and she leaned forward in her chair.

"I don't suppose you know that I am quite useless at any kind of housework," she said. "I can't wash things, I can't cook, and I can scarcely sew."

Mrs. Farquhar smiled.

"When I first came out here from Toronto it was much the same with me, and there was nobody to teach me. It's fortunate that men are not very fastidious in this part of Canada. In any case I had, perhaps, better mention that while I would be glad to pay you at the usual rate and you would be required to help, you would live with us as one of the family. I want a companion.

With my husband at work from sunup until dark, it's often lonely here. Besides, the arrangement would give you an opportunity for learning a little and finding out how you like the country."

Alison thought hard for a few moments. What she was offered was a situation as a servant, but she decided that it would be more pleasant here than she supposed it must generally be in England. She felt inclined to like this woman, and her husband's manner was reassuring. There was no doubt that they would treat her well.

"I'm afraid that in a little while you would be sorry you had suggested it," she said.

"The question is, would you like to try?"

"I'm quite sure of that," declared Alison impulsively. "I don't suppose you know what it is to be offered a resting-place when you arrive, feeling very friendless and forlorn, in a new country."

Mrs. Farquhar smiled.

"Then if you don't care to stay with Mrs. Hunter you must come straight back here. It would, perhaps, be better if you went to her in the first instance."

"But don't you want any references?"

"I don't think I do. In this case, your face is sufficient, and from experience we don't attach any great importance to vouchers of the other kind. Harry sometimes says that when a man is found to be insufferable in the old country they give him a walletful of letters of introduction, crediting him with all the virtues, and send him out to us. Besides, even if you were really quite dreadful, your friends wouldn't go back on you when I

wrote to them."

Alison laughed, and as the hired man appeared at noon with Farquhar's team she drove away with Thorne soon after dinner. When they had left the house behind she turned to him.

"You have been talking about me to Mrs. Farquhar," she said.

"Yes," admitted Thorne with a smile, "I must confess that I have. Is there any reason why you should be angry?"

"I'm not," Alison informed him. "But why did you do it?"

"I'm far from sure that you will like Mrs. Hunter. In fact, I'd be a little astonished if you did; and if you were a relative of mine I'd try to make you stay with Mrs. Farquhar."

"I wonder whether that means that Mrs. Hunter doesn't like you?"

Thorne laughed good-humoredly.

"Oh, I'm much too insignificant a person to count either way. Mrs. Hunter is what you might call *grande dame*."

"Have you any of them in western Canada?"

"Well," answered Thorne, with an air of whimsical reflection, "there are certainly not many, and in spite of it the country gets along pretty well. We have, however, quite a few women of excellent education and manners who don't seem to mind making their children's dresses and washing their husband's clothes. Anyway, if she's at home, you can form your own opinion of Florence Hunter in an hour or two."

"Is she often away?"

"Not infrequently. Every now and then she goes off to

Winnipeg, Toronto, or Montreal."

"But what about her husband? Can he leave his farm?"

"Hunter," Thorne replied dryly, "invariably stays at home."

His manner made it clear that he intended to say no more on that subject, and they talked about other matters while the wagon jolted on across the sunlit prairie.

CHAPTER V
THORNE GIVES ADVICE

It was early in the evening when they drove into sight of the Hunter homestead, and as they approached it Alison glanced about her with some curiosity. Long rows of clods out of which rose a tangle of withered grass tussocks stretched across the foreground. Thorne told her that this was the breaking, land won from the prairie too late for sowing in the previous year. Farther on, they skirted another stretch of more friable and cleaner clods, shattered and mellowed by the frost, and then they came to a space of charred stubble. Beyond that, a waste of yellow straw stood almost knee-high, and Thorne said that as the latter had no value on the prairie it was generally burned off to clear the ground for the following crop. He added that wheat was usually grown on the same land for several years without any attempt at fertilization.

Alison, however, knew nothing of farming, and it was the house at which she gazed with most interest. It stood not far from a broad shallow lake with a thin birch bluff on one side of it, a commodious two-storied building with a wide veranda. It was apparently built of wood, but its severity of outline was relieved by gaily picked-out scroll-work and lattice shutters; and in front of the entrance somebody had attempted to make a garden.

The stables and barns behind it were new frame buildings, and there were wire fences stretching back from these. After her experience of the last few days, Alison had not expected to see anything like it in western Canada.

Then she began to wonder whether Florence Hunter's life in the West had made much change in her. She recollected her as a pretty but rather pallid girl, with a manner a little too suggestive of self-confidence, and a look of calculating tenacity in her eyes. Alison had continued to treat her as a friend after she had incurred the hostility of Mrs. Leigh, but she realized that it was chiefly Florence's courage and resourcefulness that had impressed her, and not her other qualities. She had not seen Florence's husband.

A few minutes later Thorne drove up to the front of the house, and Alison saw a woman, who hitherto had been hidden by one of the pillars, lying in a canvas chair on the veranda with a book in her hand. The sunlight that streamed in upon her called up fiery gleams in her red hair and shimmered on her long dress of soft, filmy green. Alison promptly decided that the latter had come from New York or Montreal. There was no doubt that Florence Hunter's appearance was striking, though her expression even in repose seemed to indicate a dissatisfied, exacting temperament. At length she heard the rattle of wheels, for she rose.

"Alison, by all that's wonderful!" she cried.

There was astonishment in the exclamation, but Alison could not convince herself that there was any great pleasure, and it

was with a certain sense of constraint that she permitted Thorne to help her down. He walked with her up to the veranda, and acknowledged Mrs. Hunter's casual greeting by lifting his hat.

"Sit down," said the latter to Alison, pointing to another chair. "Where have you sprung from?"

"From Winnipeg. I came out to earn my living, and nobody seemed to want me there."

Florence laughed.

"You earn your living! It's clear that something very extraordinary must have happened; but we'll talk of that after supper. So you decided to come to me?"

It was, Alison realized, merely a question and nothing more.

"I'm afraid I was a little presumptuous," she replied. "There is, of course, no reason why you should have me."

Her companion looked at her with a curious smile.

"You are still in the habit of saying things of that kind? I suppose it runs in the family."

Alison winced, for she remembered that her mother could on occasion be painfully rude.

"You haven't said anything to convince me that I was wrong."

"Was it necessary?" Florence asked languidly. "I was never very effusive, as you ought to know. Of course, you'll stay here as long as it pleases you."

The invitation was clear enough, but there was no warmth in it; and Alison was relieved when a man came up the steps. He was rather short in stature, and there was nothing striking in his

appearance. He had a quiet brown face and very brown hands, and he had evidently been working, for he wore long boots, a coarse blue shirt, and blue duck overalls. He shook hands with Thorne cordially, and then turned toward Alison.

"My husband," said Florence. "Miss Leigh, Elcot; I used to know her in England. She has just arrived."

Alison noticed that Hunter favored her with a glance of grave scrutiny, but he did not seem in the least astonished, nor did he glance at his wife. This indicated that he was in the habit of accepting without question anything that the latter did. Then he held out his hand.

"I'm very glad to see you, and we'll try to make you comfortable," he said with a smile which softened the girl's heart toward him. Then he turned to his wife.

"Is supper ready? I want to haul in another load of wood before it's dark."

"It should have been ready now. I don't know what they're doing inside," was the careless reply.

It occurred to Alison that her hostess might have gone to see, but she was half annoyed with Thorne when she noticed his badly dissembled grin. Then Hunter inquired if she had had a comfortable journey.

"Not very," she answered. "You see, I traveled Colonist."

"How dreadful!" Florence exclaimed.

Her husband smiled at Alison.

"It depends," he said. "It's good enough if you can wait until

after the steamboat train. I used to travel that way myself once upon a time; I had to do it then."

"Elcot," his wife explained, "is one of the most economically minded men living. He grudges every dollar unless it's for new implements."

Hunter did not contradict her. He and Thorne left the veranda, and soon after they returned from leading the team to the stable, a trim maid appeared to announce that supper was ready. Hunter led Alison into a big and very simply furnished room. A long table ran down one side, and half a dozen men attired much as Hunter was took their places about the uncovered lower half of it. There was a cloth on the upper portion, with a gap of several feet between its margin and the nearest of the teamsters' seats. It occurred to Alison, who had been told that the hired man generally ate with his employer on the prairie, that this compromise was rather pitiful, though she did not know that Hunter had once or twice had words with his wife on the question. As the meal, which was bountiful, proceeded, he now and then spoke to the men; but Florence confined her attention to Alison, until at length she addressed Thorne.

"To what do we owe the pleasure of seeing you?" she inquired.

"In the first place, I came to bring Miss Leigh; she hired me."

Thorne laid a very slight stress upon the hired. It seemed to indicate that he recognized his station in relation to a guest of the house, and Alison felt a little uncomfortable. For one thing, though that did not quite account for her uneasiness, she

remembered that she had not paid him.

"Then," he added, "I called in the usual course of business. I have for disposal a few tablets of very excellent English soap, a case of peach-bloom cosmetic, and one or two other requisites of the kind."

Alison regretted that she laughed, but she felt that Florence's attitude toward the man had rendered the thrust admissible, and she saw a faint smile in Hunter's eyes. Her hostess, however, was equal to the occasion.

"If they're not as rubbishy as usual, I'll buy a few things and give them to the maids. Is that the whole of your stock?"

"I've a box of new gramophone records."

Florence looked at her husband, and Alison fancied that she had noticed and meant to punish him for his smile.

"You'll buy them, Elcot."

"You haven't tried the other lot," Hunter protested. "Besides, the instrument seemed to have contracted bronchitis when I last had it out."

"It will do to amuse the boys when the nights get dark," replied Florence. Then she turned to Alison. "One could hardly get a dollar out of him with a lever."

"Doesn't it depend on the kind of lever you use?" Alison asked.

Thorne grinned, but Florence answered unhesitatingly.

"Oh, in the case of the average man it doesn't matter, so long as it's strong enough and you have a fulcrum. We'll admit that

the type can be generous, but it's only when it throws a reflected luster on themselves. Otherwise judicious pressure is necessary."

"Are you going to camp with us to-night?" Hunter asked Thorne.

"No," answered the latter. "I have some business at the Bluff, and I want to get off again early to-morrow."

In a few more minutes the teamsters rose, and Hunter, making excuses to Alison, went out with them. Florence looked after them, and then turned to the girl with a disdainful lifting of her brows.

"Cormorants," she commented. "They've been very slow to-night. Eight minutes is about their usual limit. I don't think they even look at their food – it just goes down. I have once or twice suggested to Elcot that he is wasting his money by giving them the things he does. It's difficult, though, to make him listen to reason."

Alison said nothing, and after a while Florence rose.

"We'll have a talk on the veranda while they clear away."

She pointed to a chair when they reached the veranda, and then sank languidly into one close by.

"Tell me all about it," she said.

It was not a pleasant task to Alison, for it entailed the mention of her father's death and an account of the difficulties that had followed, but she spoke for a few minutes, and her companion casually expressed her sympathy.

"I can understand why you came out," she added with a bitter

laugh. "When I first met you I was earning just enough to keep me on the border line between respectability and – the other thing – that is by the exercise of the most unpleasant self-denial. What I should have done without the extra twelve pounds your mother's guild paid me for playing the piano twice a week at the working girls' club I don't like to think. That is why I made no complaint when they added to my duties the teaching of a class on another evening and the collecting of the subscriptions to the sewing society. Your mother, I heard, informed the committee that in her opinion twelve pounds was a good deal too much, and I believe she added that such a rate of payment was apt to make a young woman of my class far too independent."

Alison's cheeks burned, for she knew that Florence had been correctly informed; but she had no thought of mentioning that she had expostulated with her mother on the subject.

"Well," said Florence, "it was not your fault, and I'm sorry for you. I suppose you had – difficulties – with some of your employers? No doubt one or two of them tried to make love to you?"

Alison made a little gesture of disgust.

"Oh," laughed Florence, "I know. You probably flared out at the offender, and either got your work found fault with or lost your situation. I didn't. After all, a smile costs nothing, though it's a little difficult now and then. In my case, it led to shorter hours, higher wages, an occasional Saturday afternoon trip to the country. I got what I could, and in due time it was generally easy

to turn round upon and get rid of the provider. Still, it was just a little humiliating with a certain type of man, and it was a relief when Elcot took me out of it. I try to remember that I owe him that when he gets unusually wearisome, though one must do him the justice to admit that he never refers to it."

Alison sat silent, shrinking from her companion. She had faced a good many unpleasant things during the past few years, but they had wrought but little change in her nature. The part her hostess had played would have been a wholly hateful one to her.

"Where did you come across Thorne?" Florence asked.

Alison told her, and she looked thoughtful.

"When was that? I supposed you had come straight from the station."

"Four days ago," answered Alison unhesitatingly, though she would have much preferred not to mention it.

"Four days! And you have been driving round the country since then with Thorne?"

Alison felt her face grow hot, but her answer was clear and sharp.

"Of course; I couldn't help it. We should have been here earlier, only a horse went lame. In any case, after what you have told me, I cannot see why you should adopt that tone."

Florence raised her brows.

"My dear," she said, "I was a working woman of no account in England when I first met you – but things are rather different now. It doesn't exactly please me that a guest of mine should

indulge in an escapade of this description. Doesn't it strike you as hardly fitting?"

Hunter, who had come up the steps unobserved, stopped beside them just then.

"Rubbish!" he said curtly. "It was unavoidable. I've had a talk with Leslie; he told me exactly what delayed him."

Florence waved her hand.

"Oh," she replied, "let it go at that. I couldn't resist the temptation of sticking a pin or two into Alison. What has brought you back?"

"We broke the wagon pole. It didn't seem worth while to put in a new one to-night."

He moved away and left them, and Alison turned to her companion.

"Did he mean Mr. Thorne by Leslie?"

"Of course."

"But isn't his name Maverick?"

"Did you call him that?"

"I can't remember, though I suppose I must have done so. Some of the others certainly did."

Florence looked amused.

"I suppose you haven't an idea what a maverick is?"

Alison said that she had none at all, and her companion proceeded to inform her.

"It's a steer that won't feed and follow tamely with the herd, but goes off or gets wild and smashes things, and generally does

what's least desirable. As you have spent some days with him you will no doubt understand why they have fixed the name on Thorne."

Alison glanced at her with a sparkle in her eyes.

"I can only say this. I have met a few men one could look up to – after all, there are good people in the world – but I haven't yet come across one who showed more tact and considerate thoughtfulness than Maverick Thorne."

Florence was evidently amused at this – indeed, to be sardonically amused at something seemed her favorite pose.

"I shouldn't like to disturb that kind of optimism – and here he is; I'll leave you to talk to him. As it happens, Elcot looks rather grumpy, and the mail-carrier has just brought out a sheaf of my bills from Winnipeg which he hasn't seen yet."

She sailed away with a rustle of elaborate draperies, and Thorne sat down.

"I'm going on to the bluff in half an hour," he informed her.

Alison was conscious of a certain hesitation, but there was something to be said.

"How much do I owe you?" she asked.

"Half a dollar."

Alison flushed.

"Why didn't you say four or five dollars?"

"Since you evidently mean to insist on an answer, there are several reasons for my modesty. For one thing, you would have to borrow the money from Mrs. Hunter, which I don't think you

would like to do. For another, if you were a Canadian I'd say – nothing – but as you're not used to the country yet you wouldn't care to accept a favor from a stranger."

"But it would be a favor in any case."

"Then you can get rid of the obligation by giving me half a dollar."

The girl looked at him sharply as she laid the silver coin in his hand, but he met her gaze with a whimsical smile.

"Thank you," he said. "I suppose you are going back to Mrs. Farquhar?"

"Yes," replied Alison impulsively. "I believe I am; but I may wait for a few days."

"I think you're wise. You wouldn't find things very pleasant here."

"Why?"

"If you'll permit me to mention it, you're too pretty."

Alison straightened herself suddenly in her chair.

"You don't like Mrs. Hunter, but does that justify you in saying what you have? You can't mean that she would be – jealous?"

"That's exactly what I do mean."

He saw the angry color mantle in the face of the girl, and raised his hand in expostulation.

"Wait a little; I want to explain. First of all, she wouldn't have the slightest cause for jealousy. You're not the kind to give her one, and Elcot Hunter is one of the best and straightest men I know. In fact, that's partly what is troubling me."

"Why should it trouble you?" Alison interrupted.

Thorne appeared to reflect, and, indignant with his presumption as she was, the girl admitted that he did it very well.

"If you urge me for a precise answer, I'm afraid I'll have to confess that I don't quite know. Anyway, because Hunter is the sort of man I have described, he'd try to make things pleasant for you, and there's no doubt that his wife would resent it. Whether she's fond of him at all, or not, I naturally can't say, but she expects him to be entirely at her beck and call, and I don't think she'd tolerate any little courtesies he might show you."

Alison sat silent for a moment or two when he stopped, looking at him with perplexed eyes, though she felt that he was right.

"It's curious, isn't it?" she said at length. "Florence must have had a very unpleasant time in England, where she had to practise the strictest self-denial. One would have thought it would have made her content and compassionate now that she has everything that she could wish for."

"No," responded Thorne, "in a way, it's natural. That kind of life often has the opposite effect. Those who lead it have so much to put up with that if once they escape it makes them determined never even to contemplate doing the least thing they don't like again."

"Oh," declared Alison impulsively, "I shouldn't care to think that."

"Well," said Thorne, with unmoved gravity, "I don't know

whether you have had as much to face as you say that she has, though one or two things seem to suggest it, but it certainly hasn't spoiled you."

Then he rose.

"As I want to reach the bluff to-night, I'll get my team harnessed."

Alison watched him go down the steps with a somewhat perplexing sense of regret. She had met the man only four days ago, but she felt that she was parting from a friend.

A few minutes later Florence Hunter called her into the house; and she stayed with her a week before she went to Mrs. Farquhar. She admitted that Florence had given her no particular cause for leaving, but she at least made no objections when Alison acquainted her with her decision.

CHAPTER VI
THORNE CONTEMPLATES A CHANGE

Alison had spent a few days with Mrs. Farquhar without finding the least reason to regret the choice she had made, when one evening Farquhar helped her and his wife into his wagon in front of the little hotel at Graham's Bluff, where he had passed the last half-hour in conversation with an implement dealer. When they had taken their places he drove cautiously down the wide, unpaved street, which was seamed with ruts. On either side of it, straggling and singularly unpicturesque frame houses, destitute of paint or any attempt at adornment, rose abruptly from the prairie, though here and there the usual plank sidewalk ran along the front of them. Alison was convinced that she had rarely seen a more uninteresting place, though she had discovered that its inhabitants were not only quite satisfied with it, but firmly believed in its roseate future. This seemed somewhat curious, as a number of them had come there from the cities, but she did not know then that the optimistic assurance with which they were endued is common in the West, and that it is, as a rule, in due time justified.

Turning a corner, they came out into a wider space from which a riband of rutted trail led out into the wilderness. Farquhar

pulled up his team. Close in front of them, a crowd had gathered about a wagon, and a man who stood upon a box in it seemed to be addressing the assembly. Alison could not see his face, and his voice was, for the most part, drowned by bursts of laughter, but he was waving his hands to emphasize his remarks, and this and his general attitude reminded her of the itinerant auctioneers she had now and then seen in the market-place of an English provincial town, though the crowd and the surroundings were in this case very different.

The prairie, which was dusty white, stretched back to the soft red glow of the far horizon, and overhead there was a wonderful blue transparency. The light was still sharp, and the figures of the men stood out with a curious distinctness. Most of them were picturesque in wide, gray hats and long boots, with blue shirt and jacket hanging loose above the rather tight, dust-smeared trousers, though there were some who wore black hats and spruce store clothes. These, however, looked very much out of place.

"Thorne's pitching it to the boys in great style to-night," chuckled Farquhar. "We'll get a little nearer; I like to hear him when he has a good head of steam up."

He started the team, but Alison was sensible of a slight shock of displeasure. She was aware that Thorne sold things, because he had told her so, but she had never seen him actively engaged in his profession, and this kind of thing seemed extremely undignified. She had got rid of a good many prejudices during the past few years, and was, for that matter, in due time to discard some more;

but it hurt her to see a friend of hers – and she admitted that she regarded him as such – playing the part of mountebank to amuse the inhabitants of a forlorn prairie town.

Farquhar drew up his team again presently. Alison fancied that Mrs. Farquhar was watching her, and she fixed her eyes upon the crowd and Thorne. His remarks were received with uproarious laughter, but she was quick to notice that there was nothing in what he said that any one could reasonably take exception to.

Presently there was an interruption, for a man in white shirt and store clothing pushed forward through the crowd, with another, who was big and lank and hard-faced, and wore old blue duck, following close behind him.

"Now," exclaimed Farquhar expectantly, "we're going to have some fun. That's Sergeant, the storekeeper, who sells drugs and things, and he's been on Mavy's trail for quite a while. So far, Mavy has generally talked him down, but to-night he's got a backer. Custer has the reputation of being a bad man, and it's generally supposed that he owes Sergeant a good deal of money."

"Hadn't we better drive on if there's likely to be any trouble?" suggested his wife.

Farquhar said that Thorne would probably prove a match for his opponents without provoking actual hostilities, and added that they could go on later if it seemed advisable. Alison laughed when a hoarse burst of merriment followed the orator's last sally.

"It was really witty," she said. "In fact, it's all clever. I wonder how he learned to talk like that."

Mrs. Farquhar smiled.

"It's probably in the blood. I believe one of his close relatives is a bishop."

"It doesn't quite follow," objected Farquhar. "I heard one of them, an English one, in Montreal, who wasn't a patch on Mavy. Anyway, if you want to hold the boys here you have to be clever."

Then a protesting voice broke in upon Thorne's flowing periods.

"Boys," it said, "that man has played you for suckers 'bout long enough, and this kind of thing is rough on every decent storekeeper in the town. We're making the place grow; we're always willing to make a deal when you have anything to sell; and we're generally open to supply you with better goods than he keeps, at a lower figure."

"In my case," Thorne pointed out, "you get amusing tales and sound advice thrown in. You can at any time consult me about anything, from the best way to make your hair curl to the easiest means of getting rid of the mortgage man, which in most cases is to pay his bill."

"I could tell 'way funnier tales than you do when I was asleep," interrupted the storekeeper's friend.

Thorne disregarded this.

"I've nothing to urge against the storekeepers, boys. They're useful to the community – it's possible that they're more useful than I am – but it doesn't seem quite fitting to hold them up as deserving objects of your compassion. If you have any doubt on

that point you have only to look at their clothes. I don't like to be personal, but since there are two men here from whom I don't expect very much delicacy, I feel inclined to wonder whether that is a brass watch and guard Mr. Sergeant is wearing."

"No, sir," snapped the other, who was evidently too disturbed in temper to notice the simple trap, "it's English gold. Cost me most of a hundred and twenty dollars in Winnipeg."

Thorne waved his hand.

"That's the point, boys. Mine, which was made in Connecticut, cost five. I think you can see the inference. If you don't, I should like you to ask him where he got the hundred and twenty dollars."

There was applauding laughter, for the men were quite aware that they had furnished it, but Thorne proceeded:

"It's likely that I could buy things of that kind, and keep as smart a team as our friend does, if I struck you for the interest he charges on your held-over accounts."

"That's quite right!" somebody cried. "They don't want no pity. They've got bonds on half our farms. Guess the usual interest's blamed robbery."

Once more the storekeeper lifted up his voice.

"You wouldn't call it that, if you'd ever tried to collect it. You stand out of your money until harvest's in, and then when you drive round the homestead's empty, and somebody's written on the door, 'Sorry I couldn't pack the house off.'"

This was followed by further laughter, for, as Farquhar explained to Alison, pack signifies the transporting of one's

possessions, usually upon the owner's back, in most of western Canada, and the notice thus implies that the defaulting farmer had judiciously removed himself and everything of value except his dwelling, before the arrival of his creditor.

"You could shut down on the land, anyway," retorted one man.

"Could I?" Sergeant inquired savagely. "When it's free-grant land, and the man hadn't broke enough to get his patent?"

The crowd, encouraged by a word or two from Thorne, seemed disposed to drift off into a disquisition on the homestead laws, but Sergeant pulled them up.

"We'll keep to the point," he said. "When you buy your drugs at my store you get just what you ask for with the maker's label stuck fast on it. Maverick keeps loose ones, and if you ask him to cure your liver it's quite likely that he'll give you hair-restorer."

Farquhar chuckled.

"I'm afraid there's some truth in that," he admitted. "Still, it's to Mavy's credit that when the case is serious he generally prescribes a visit to the nearest doctor."

In the meanwhile the storekeeper had secured the attention of the assembly.

"What I said, I'll prove!" he added vehemently. "Get up and tell them how he played you, Custer."

His companion waved his hand.

"I'll do that, in the first place, and when I've got through I'll do a little more. I went to Maverick most two weeks ago when my stomach was sour, and he gives me a bottle for a dollar."

"He's perfectly correct so far, except that he hasn't produced the dollar yet," Thorne assented. "I should like to point out that I can cure the kind of sourness he said it was every time, but I can't do very much when the trouble's in the man's sour nature. You took that stuff I gave you the day you got it, Custer?"

"I did. I was powerful sick next morning."

He turned to the crowd, speaking in a tragic voice.

"Boys, he'd run out of the cure I wanted and gave me the first bottle handy, with a wrong label on. I've no use for a man who doses you with stuff that makes your inside feel like it was growing wool."

There were delighted cries at this, but Custer appeared perfectly serious, and Thorne looked down at him.

"No," he drawled, "in your case it would grow bristles."

The laugh was with him now, but it was a moment or two before Custer, who was evidently slow of comprehension, quite grasped the nature of the compliment which had been paid him. The term hog is a particularly offensive one in that country. Then he proceeded to clamber up into the wagon, and Thorne addressed those among his listeners who stood nearest it.

"Hold on to him just a moment," he cried, and two men did as he directed. "I merely want to point out that our friend has supplied the explanation of the trouble – he said he was sick the next morning. Well, as my internal cure is a powerful one, there are instructions on every bottle to take a tablespoonful every six hours, which would have carried him on for several days. It's

clear that he felt better after one dose, which encouraged him to take the lot for the next one."

"He has probably hit it," commented Farquhar. "They do it now and then."

"Now," continued Thorne to the men below, "you can let Mr. Custer go. If it's the only thing that will satisfy him, I'll get down."

"You'll get down sure," bawled Custer. "If you're not out when I'm ready, I'll pitch you."

Farquhar started his team.

"I've no doubt Sergeant had the thing fixed beforehand, but I'm inclined to fancy that Custer will be sorry before he's through. Anyway, we'll get on."

He had driven only a few yards when his wife looked at him with a smile.

"Was it a very great self-denial, Harry?"

"Since you ask the question, I'm afraid it was," laughed Farquhar.

"Then I won't mind very much if you get down and see that they don't impose on Mavy – I mean too many of them. I don't want him to get hurt if it can be prevented."

Farquhar swung himself over the side of the wagon.

"It's hardly probable. The boys like Mavy, but, as Sergeant has one or two toughs among the crowd, I'll go along."

Mrs. Farquhar smiled at Alison as she drove on.

"One mustn't expect too much," she said. "After all, if he comes home with a swollen face it will be in a good cause."

Alison made no comment. She was slightly disgusted, and her pride was somewhat hurt. She had made a friend of this man, perhaps, she thought, too readily, and the fact that he had laid himself out to amuse the crowd and had, as the result of it, been drawn into a discreditable brawl was far from pleasant. She was compelled to confess on reflection that he could not very well have avoided the latter, but it was equally clear that he had not even attempted it. Indeed, she had noticed that he jumped down from his wagon with a suspicious alacrity.

Half an hour later a fast team overtook them and Farquhar alighted from a two-seated vehicle. He smiled at his wife as he sat down beside her.

"There was very little trouble," he announced. "Mavy's friends kept the toughs off, and I believe he'll sell out everything he has in his wagon."

"And Custer?"

"I don't think he can see quite as well as he could an hour ago – as one result," replied Farquhar dryly.

Then he flicked the team, and they drove on faster into the dusk that was creeping up across the prairie.

The next morning Alison was standing in the sunshine outside the house when Thorne drove into sight from behind the barn which cut off the view of one strip of prairie. He got down from his wagon and appeared disconcerted when he saw the girl, who fancied that she understood the reason, for he had a discolored bruise on one cheek and a lump on his forehead.

"I want a few words with Farquhar," he explained. "I saw him at the settlement last night, but I couldn't get hold of him."

"No," returned Alison disdainfully, "you were too busy." Then something impelled her to add, "You don't seem a very great deal the worse for your exploit."

Thorne leaned against the side of the wagon, though she noticed that he first pulled the brim of his soft hat lower down over his face.

"That fact doesn't seem to cause you much satisfaction," he observed.

"Why should it?"

"We'll let that pass. On the other hand, there's just as little reason why you should be displeased with me."

"Are you sure that I am displeased?" inquired Alison, suspecting his intention of leading her up to some definite expression of indignation. This would, as she realized, be tantamount to the betrayal of a greater interest in his doings than she was prepared to show.

"Your appearance suggested it; but we'll call it disgusted, if you like," he retorted with amusement in his eyes.

It occurred to Alison that as he had evidently taken her resentment for granted it might after all be wiser to prove it justifiable.

"Then," she said, "a scene of the kind you figured in last night is naturally repugnant to any one not accustomed to it."

"Did it jar on Mrs. Farquhar?"

"No," Alison admitted, "I don't think it did."

"Then she's not accustomed to such scenes either. Rows of any kind really aren't very common in western Canada – but she seems to have more comprehension than you have."

This was turning the tables with a vengeance, and Alison was a trifle disconcerted, for instead of standing on his defense the man had unexpectedly proceeded to attack.

"Do you care to explain that?" she asked.

"I'll try," Thorne replied genially. "Perhaps because she's married, Mrs. Farquhar seems to understand that there are occasions when a man is driven into doing things he has an aversion for. In a way, it's to his credit when he recognizes that the alternative is out of the question. Can you get hold of that?"

"I'm not sure. You see, you suggest that there may be an alternative."

"It's often the case. The difficulty is that now and then the consequences of choosing it are a good deal worse than the other thing."

Alison could grasp the gist of this. There was something to be said for the resolution that could boldly grapple with a crisis as soon as it arose, instead of seeking the readiest means of escape from it.

"Now," added Thorne, "I was quite sure when the storekeeper appeared on the scene that he had hired the biggest tough in the settlement to make trouble for me. Of course I could have backed down, or at least I could have tried it, but the result would

naturally have been to make the opposition more determined on the next occasion. It seemed wiser to face the situation then and there."

Again Alison felt that he was right, and she shifted her point of attack.

"You wish to assure me that it was with very great reluctance you jumped down from your wagon last night?"

Thorne laughed softly.

"No," he acknowledged; "if one must be honest, I can't go quite so far as that."

The girl was a little astonished at herself. In spite of his last confession her disgust – though she felt that was not the right word – with his conduct had greatly lessened, and she was conscious of a certain curiosity about his sensations during the incident.

"You were not in the least afraid?" she asked.

"No; but, after all, that's no great admission. You see, with most of us what we call courage is largely the result of experience. Now, I knew I was a match for Sergeant's tough. The man is big, but he has only a hazy notion when to lead off and how to parry."

"How did you know that – from experience?"

"Oh, no," returned Thorne, smiling. "I once watched him endeavoring to convince another man that he was utterly wrong in maintaining that the country derived the least benefit from the liquor prohibition laws. He succeeded because the other man

didn't know any more than he did."

Alison laughed.

"After all, I don't think the subject is of very great interest. I wonder why you went to so much trouble to explain the thing to me."

The man gazed at her a moment in somewhat natural astonishment and then he took off his wide hat ceremoniously, though as a smile crept into his eyes she could not be sure whether it was done in seriousness or whimsically. In any case, he spoiled the effect by remembering his bruised face and hastily clapping it on again.

"May I say that I should like to retain your favorable opinion if it's possible?" he replied, and leaving his team plucking at the grass he turned away and entered the house. As it happened, Farquhar had just come in for dinner, which was not quite ready, and Thorne sat down opposite him.

"If your wife has no objections, I want you to do me a favor, Harry," he said.

His host expressed his readiness, but Mrs. Farquhar looked at him inquiringly.

"It's just this," he explained. "You deal with Grantly at the railroad settlement, and it's possible that he may not have formed a very accurate opinion of my character. In fact, I shouldn't wonder if odd things the boys have said have prejudiced him against me."

"It's quite likely," Farquhar admitted with a grin.

"Then I want you to assure him that I'm a perfectly responsible and reliable person."

Mrs. Farquhar laughed outright.

"Aren't you asking rather more than Harry could consistently do?"

"Well," Thorne replied thoughtfully, "it might serve the purpose if he told Grantly that I generally paid my bills. I don't ask him to guarantee my account or back my draft. It wouldn't be reasonable."

"It wouldn't," assented Mrs. Farquhar with uncompromising decision. "Are you going to make some new venture?"

"I have a hazy notion that I might take up a quarter-section and turn farmer."

His hostess flashed a significant glance at her husband, who smiled.

"But why?"

"If you don't get your crop hailed out, droughted, or frozen, you can now and then pick up a few dollars that way," Thorne explained. "Besides, a farmer is a person of acknowledged status on the prairie."

"Have you any other reasons – more convincing ones?"

Thorne regarded his hostess with undiminished gravity.

"If I have, they may appear by and by – when, for instance, I've doubled my holding and raised a record crop on three hundred and twenty acres."

"It isn't done in a day," warned Farquhar.

"It depends on how you begin; and commencing with a tent, a span of oxen, and one breaker-plow doesn't appeal to me. I want a couple of horse teams, the latest implements and the best seed I can get my hands on."

"I guess my word alone won't induce Grantly to let you have them – still, I'll do what I can."

Thorne spread out his hands.

"If anything more is wanted Hunter will be given an opportunity for supplying it. I don't see any reason why I shouldn't distribute my favors."

"And when does the rash experiment begin?"

Thorne straightened himself in his chair.

"It won't be an experiment. If I take hold, which isn't quite certain yet, I'll stay with the thing."

Then he broke into his usual careless laugh.

"I'll take a long drive round all the outlying settlements and work off a last frolic first."

"Yes," observed his hostess, "the carnival before Lent."

After that she proceeded to lay out dinner and they let the subject drop, but Alison, who entered the room just then, wondered why Mrs. Farquhar flashed a searching glance at her.

CHAPTER VII
A USEFUL FRIEND

Thorne drove away after dinner and, for it must be admitted that he preferred other people's cookery to his own, he contrived to reach the Hunter homestead just as supper was being laid out one evening some days later. During the meal he announced his intention of staying all night, but he did not explain what had brought him there until he sat with his host and hostess on the veranda while dusk crept up across the prairie. He felt inclined to wonder why Mrs. Hunter had favored them with her company, for he supposed that it was not altogether for the sake of enjoying the cool evening air. This surmise, as it happened, was quite correct. She had another purpose in her mind, for since Alison's visit she had taken a certain interest in the man.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.