

NEIGHBOURS



Robert Stead

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Title: Neighbours

Date of first publication: 1922

Author: Robert Stead (1880-1959)

Date first posted: Oct. 17, 2013

Date last updated: Oct. 17, 2013

Faded Page eBook #20110301

This eBook was produced by: Barbara Watson, Ross Cooling, Mark Akrigg & the online Distributed Proofreaders Canada team at <http://www.pgdpcanada.net>

NEIGHBOURS

By

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**TORONTO
HODDER AND STOUGHTON
LIMITED**

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PRINTED IN CANADA.

NEIGHBOURS

CHAPTER I.

My earliest recollection links back to a grey stone house by a road entering a little Ontario town. Across the road was a mill-pond, and across the mill-pond was a mill; an old-fashioned woolen mill which was the occasion and support of the little town. Beside the mill was a water-wheel; not a modern turbine, but a wooden wheel which, on sunshiny days, sprayed a mist of jewels into the river beneath with the prodigality of a fairy prince.

My father worked in the mill, as did most of the men and many of the women of the town. That was before Unionism had succeeded in any general introduction of the eight-hour day; my father started work at seven in the morning and worked until six at night. His days were full of the labor of the mill, but his evenings and the early, sun-bright summer mornings belonged to his tiny farm at the border of the town. We had two cows, a pig or two, some apple and cherry trees, and little fields of corn and clover.

The mill-pond was held in check by a stone dam which crossed from the road almost in front of our door to a point on the mill itself. The stone crest of this dam rose about two feet above the level of the water in the mill-pond, and was about two feet wide. Along this crest my father walked on his way to and from the mill, but I had strict orders not to attempt thefeat, with the promise that I would be thrashed "within an inch of my life" if I did.

And now I must introduce Jean Lane, daughter of our nearest neighbour, Mr. Peter Lane. Jean is to travel with us through most of the chapters of this somewhat intimate account, and you may as well meet her at four, bare-footed and golden-haired and blue-eyed, with a wisp of white cotton dress and a gleam of white teeth set between lips of rose-leaf. Demurely down the road she came to where I lay sprawled on the river bank contemplating the leisured precision of the water-wheel beyond. When she reached me she paused, sat down, and buried her feet in the soft sand of the bank.

"I want to go to the mill," she said, when her little toes were well out of sight.

"But you can't go to the mill," I said, with the mature authority of six. "You'd fall in."

"I wouldn't, neither,"—she glanced at me selfishly from under her yellow locks—"not if you helped me."

It was a difficult situation. Here was I, a young man of six, honored by a commission of great responsibility from a young woman of four. My native gallantry, as well as a pleasant feeling of competence, urged that I immediately lead her across that two foot strip of masonry. But the parental veto, and the promise of being thrashed within an inch of my life, sorely, and, as it seemed to me, unfairly, curbed my chivalry.

"I'd like to take you over, Jean," I conceded, "but my father won't let me."

"Did you' father say you mustn't take *me* over?" With almost uncanny intuition she thrust at the vulnerable spot in the armor of my good behavior.

"No; he didn't say anything about you."

"Then you can take me?"

I dug my toes into the sand beside hers, but did not answer.

"If my big bruvver John was here he'd take me over, *quick*," she continued, with a quivering lip.

John Lane was six, like me, and no bigger. The allusion to him as her big brother, who would take her over *quick*, and the quivering lip, were too much.

I scrambled to my feet. "Come," I said, with masculine recklessness, starting for the dam, and she followed joyously.

We were about half way over when something happened—I never knew what—but I plumped into deep water like a stone thrown from the shore. I took a great mouthful and came up spluttering, choking, frantic. The slippery wall gave no grip for my hands, and in a moment I must have gone down again, but Jean's head came out over the ledge and her little arms were reached down to mine. I grasped them and hung on—hung in water to my neck, while Jean and I both shouted

lustily.

Help came quickly in the person of my father, who had seen the accident from one of the upper windows of the mill, and had come rushing out at a pace which had quite upset the operatives on his route. I was dragged up on the dam in a moment, and I can remember Jean standing beside my father, crying a little, and saying, "Please don' scold him, Mr. Hall. I made him do it."

I expected my father to scold her, but he took her up in his arms and held her to his breast.

"You're a brave little girl, Jean; you're a wonderful little girl," I heard him say, and he kissed her on the face, which he hardly ever did to me. Then homeward he led me, wet and miserable, and speculating silently on what it may mean to be thrashed within an inch of one's life.

But it proved to be a day of surprises. I was not thrashed within an inch of my life, nor at all; I was undressed, and rubbed with a warm towel, and put in bed, and given a large tumblerful of hot choke-cherry wine, because it was still early in the season and the water was cold. And my little sister Marjorie came and looked at me with large, dark, comprehending eyes, and said, "I know why you didn't get thrashed?"

"Why didn't I get thrashed?" I ventured.

"Because you were so *awful* wicked. When you're awful bad you don't get thrashed; its only when you're a little bad," she explained.

I had to stay in bed for the remainder of the day, which I think was more a punishment than a precaution, so I had opportunity to think on Marjorie's philosophy. It was evident that she was right; I had the proof in my own experience; I had been very wicked, and had escaped punishment. My ideas of wickedness were well defined. Wickedness consisted of telling lies, using bad words, disobeying one's parents, getting drunk, and cutting wood on Sunday. All our religion was negative; it consisted entirely of Thou Shalt Nots. It was utterly selfish. To my father, my mother, my little sister and myself the purpose of religion was to keep us from going to Hell, and, incidentally, to cause us to go to Heaven, although the hope element never weighed as much in our minds as did the fear element.

I have said that our religion was entirely a matter of Thou Shalt Nots, but I should make one exception. There was one Thou Shalt. Thou Shalt go to church every Sunday. Accordingly each Sunday morning I was crowded into a pair of boots and stockings and a suit with an uncomfortable white collar, and the four of us walked in great solemnity to the church of our faith. There were other churches in town, but I had already learned that it was almost as bad to go to them as not to go at all; in fact, our minister was suspected of believing that it was even worse. In any case we took no chances, and when, as happened on one or two occasions, our minister was unable to preach and no substitute had been found, we stayed religiously at home.

In the church we sat in a stiff, high-backed seat, where I was required to be very still through a tedious discourse of which I comprehended nothing whatever. In summer I usually contrived to enliven the time by a surreptitious killing of beetles, with which the church was infested. The building was small, but the preacher shouted at the top of his voice, as though in competition with the rival preacher two blocks down the street, which I verily believe he was. When the sermon was over the plate was passed and I deposited a copper—the only coin I ever handled until I was ten or twelve years old. Then we filed solemnly home again.

My consciousness of evil-doing, however, rested lightly upon me. I had escaped the strap which hung behind the kitchen door, and which was a much more immediate menace than any possible torments of the after-world. I spent the remaining hours of the day in imagining situations in which I would save Jean from all kinds of disasters.

Next morning found me none the worse for my experience; indeed my dip over the dam already seemed a more or less vague recollection. After breakfast I made a journey to the big pine which grew at the very end of our little farm—a surviving monarch of the forest that in some way had escaped the locust-cloud of axe-men which had swarmed through the country twenty years before. All the good pine had been cut out then, but the hardwoods, being heavier and more difficult to market, had been left, and with them my father had wrestled many a sundown hour, and into the night until he could no longer see. But this lone pine had remained standing, a proud and melancholy reminder of the greatness of the forest and of the insane destructiveness of the maggots of men who had over-run it, sweeping away in a season that which the centuries had borne but which the centuries will not return.

I took my way in the warm morning sun past the cow-stables—the "byre" it was in those days—through the vegetable garden, and down a path between rows of sprouting corn which led to the uncleared land at the back of the farm. Here was a wooden fence to keep the cattle off the corn field. I slipped easily between the bars and followed the path, now a cow-path winding sinuously about the trunks of sturdy maples, until it brought me under the shadow of the great, green arms. Far aloft the old tree towered in majestic symmetry, and the morning breeze passed through its branches with a sound as of a mighty wind. I threw myself on the grass at its feet, and there, lying on my back, with my eyes partly shaded by my hand, I watched the fleecy clouds far, far above as they trailed their gossamer laces across the blue portals of heaven, and dreamed of a day when I should do something great and be a hero in the eyes of Jean.

Perhaps it was as I lay under the great pine on that sunny summer morning and watched the filmy clouds float gently overhead that I caught my first glimpse, shyly, wonderingly, through the golden gates of romance. It was a vision of Jean; a vision which has remained with me through the years, growing, thrilling in my moments of happiness, fading in my hours of darkness, but at no time quite obscure. Perhaps it was my first glimpse of that vision which brought me on that morning to my feet where the great pine's swaying lacework of sun and shadow patterned the green grass and set my heart lilting with the joy of being alive.

I was about to shape my lips for a whistle when I became conscious of a presence. It was Jean, her golden locks held together by a midget sunbonnet, save for some vagrant curls which nestled against the peach-pink bloom of her cheeks; her chubby bare feet seeking cover in the grass.

"I saw you going to the big tree", she explained, "so I comed too."

"Uh-huh," I commented cautiously, being gripped with a sudden sense that this young woman had led me into difficulties only a day ago. Men cannot be too careful.

She sidled toward me. "Do you know what you have to do for yesterday?" she queried.

"No," I said, with some misgiving, thinking that possibly my behavior had been reported to the Lanes to my disadvantage.

"Gwandma says when a young la-dy saves a young gen-tle-man, he-has-to-mawwy-her," she said, speaking very slowly at first, but finishing her sentence with a little run. "So you have to mawwy me."

She was beside me now, and her face was radiant with the excitement of her secret.

"But I can't marry you! Only grown-ups do that!" I protested.

"Won't we be gwown-ups some day?"

"I guess so," I admitted. And then with a sudden burst of resolution I added, "And then I'll marry you."

She held her face up to me and I leaned over and kissed it shyly. Then, hand in hand, we retraced our way down the cow-path, along the rows of sprouting corn, by the stables and past our house. Jean led me to her own home, which was next to ours, down the road.

"You have to ask Mama," she said, as our little figures dropped their shadows across Mrs. Lane's kitchen floor.

This was more than I had bargained for. I was beginning to discover that Miss Jean was a young woman of action as well as decision. But I was game.

"Mrs. Lane," I said, bracing my chubby legs for the ordeal, "I-want-to-marry-Jean."

Jean's mother looked at me with a smile that broadened until it broke into open laughter.

"I am afraid you are very precocious children," she remarked. I didn't know what that meant, but she gave us each a doughnut, and we went away happy, Jean twirling hers on her finger for a wedding ring.

CHAPTER II.

That same summer I began going to school. Perhaps I should say that John Lane and I began going to school, as it was something of a joint adventure. We talked of it together for weeks before the great event. At that time my objective in life, in so far as I had one, was to be a locomotive engineer, but John had elected to be the owner of a woolen mill—blandly overlooking the little question of capital—and we discussed our school training in the light of these ambitions.

On the eventful morning I remember my father coming into the loft and leaning over my bed, where I feigned sleep. "Puir wee mannie," I heard him say, dropping into the Scotch tongue which he reserved for moments of emotion, "it's a long road he's starting on, and a hard one, too, or he'll no be like the rest o' us." My mother scoured me well and dressed me in a clean new suit and took my cheeks between her hands and kissed me, and told me to work hard and grow up a good man like my father. At the gate I met John, and together we started down the turnpike of life.

I spent the day becoming accustomed to my new environment, and marvelling over a certain bald spot on the teacher's head which shone resplendent when the light struck it a certain way, and wondering what possible advantage it could be to a locomotive engineer to know that A had two slanting legs tied together in the middle. But nothing of importance happened until after school was dismissed, when suddenly I found myself surrounded by a group of boys a little older than myself. A carroty-headed little gamin about my size came dancing out in front of me, flinging his arms about and demanding, "Kin you fight?"

I was much too guileless to realize that this was an undersized boy, nine or ten years old, a bully who maintained his position by picking fights with children about his own size, but much his inferior in strength and hardihood. Now I had never been in a fight in my life, unless dragging Marjorie home once or twice when she was obstreperous could be so described. I don't know what made me answer as I did; probably it was the immeasurable insolence on his little, twisted face, but I shouted, "You bet! I can knock your head off!"

The boast was no sooner out than I got a smash on the mouth which set my lips trembling and drew a veil of mist across my eyes. This was followed instantly by a blow in each eye, and I saw light dancing in all directions. I could make no defence, and my assailant proceeded to punish me systematically. The little circle of savages were shouting, "Punch him, Carrots! Punch him, Carrots!" and I could have testified that Carrots was following their advice. I threw my arms about in the air and yelled with what breath I had left, but I did not run away; I stood and took it. That is one of the facts of my life which I like to remember, that although hopelessly outclassed in my first fight, I proved that, if I couldn't give a thrashing, I could take one.

How much I should ultimately have taken I don't know, for suddenly John Lane rushed into the circle like a young tornado. John was no more a fighter than I, but he was resourceful; he seized the bully by the knees and bore him to the ground, where they rolled about together. Enheartened by this sudden change of fortune I too pounced upon Carrots, kicking, punching, and gouging with the greatest enthusiasm. Had I been strong enough no doubt I would have killed him, regardless of his shrieks, "Two on one; no fair! no fair!"

For a moment or two I had one misgiving—would the supporters of Carrots now come to the rescue of their chief? I might have saved myself any worry on that account. They viewed the sudden change of Carrots' fortune with surprise, certainly, but also with complacency. Very soon they were shouting, "Punch him, New Boy! Punch him, New Boy!" and even seemed disposed to lend a hand. But John and I handled the case ourselves, ending in a tour of triumph in which we dragged Carrots feet-foremost around the complete square of the gravelly schoolyard.

As we walked home together John and I knew that, for good or ill, our lots were now inseparable. If Carrots caught either of us by himself he would be sure to take adequate revenge. And yet, even through my swollen eyes, I looked on the world with a new joy, and had a stride in my gait that I didn't have in the morning. My theology did not go far enough to advise me whether one went to Hell for fighting, so I consulted John on the point.

"Of course," he replied, laconically.

"Then we're in for it," I remarked.

"Uh-huh. But so is Carrots, and he got the worst of it here, too."

John's philosophy appealed to me. I was beginning to feel that I could stand what anybody else could stand. But my mother put a new aspect on the case.

"What you been doing?" she demanded as I entered the house. "Look at your new suit!"

Now it seemed to me that a boy who had just helped to whip the school bully, and who had two black eyes and a mouth swollen out of shape for his pains, had something more to think about than his new suit, so I retorted, "I been fighting. Look at my face!"

"I'll give you all the fighting you want," said she, reaching for the strap . . . It had been a hot day, and the cows had knocked down the fence and got into the corn field, and mother had had to chase them out six times, and she was tired. None of these things reacted to my advantage.

Two years later Marjorie and Jean started going to school, and we were proud boys indeed as we led them up the aisle to the master's desk.

I have said that the religion of my parents was essentially selfish, but I should have added that they were better than their religion. My mother's kindness had been marked in many a neighbour's home. In those days, when large families were still considered proper, her two children were a comparatively small impediment; indeed, it was commonly said among the townspeople that the smallness of my father's family had made it possible for him to pay for and clear his farm. At any rate my mother was a person of leisure by comparison with neighbour women who were trying to clothe, clean, and discipline ten or twelve children apiece.

The Lanes were in the same happy circumstances as ourselves, and being also our nearest neighbours, a considerable friendship had sprung up between the two families. This developed as we children grew older and had mutual interests in studies and sports. Jack—he was Jack now—and Jean often came over to our house on a winter's evening, bringing their school books, and the four of us sat about our big kitchen table poring over our studies or throwing or intercepting furtive glances between Jack and Marjorie, and, I may confess, between Jean and Frank. Jean was fair, with large blue eyes and clear pink cheeks and lips that always made me think of roses. They seemed always as delicate and tremulous as a rose-leaf after rain.

At eight o'clock we would close our books, and mother would say, "Marjorie, you may bring up a basin of apples," or perhaps it would be a dozen ears of roasting corn, and we would sit about the fireplace, munching in great happiness. Then we would have a game of blind-man's buff, in which I had a way of catching Jean, or button, button, who's got the button? or hide-the-handkerchief. And at nine Jack and Jean would leave for home, and we would go with them to their gate, and I would help Jean where the drifts were deep. And Marjorie and I would walk back arm in arm, and she would talk an unnecessary lot about Jack.

Jean's first poem was written about this time. She developed it one night while ostensibly busy at her studies, and slipped it into my hand when we parted in front of her house. I hurried home, but my mother and Marjorie sat so close to the lamp that I had no opportunity to read it until I went upstairs to bed. Then I smoothed the crumpled little sheet and read—

"When I am old
And very tall
I hope my name
Will be Mrs. Hall."

I lay awake for hours that night, joyously piecing together bits of rhyme, but I was no versifier, and had to be content with prose. I put it in very matter-of-fact form on my slate, which I managed next day to leave on Jean's desk:

"Your proposal is accepted.—F.H."

When I was twelve Granny Lane died, and after that Mr. and Mrs. Lane often came over, too. As we worked at our lessons we would hear the restless clicking of our mothers' knitting-needles, while our fathers fought over their checkerboard in a silence broken only by an outburst of triumph upon some clever strategy, or of chagrin when some deep-laid scheme had gone agley. Or sometimes the men would lay aside the board, and, turning their chairs toward the fire, with their pipes well lit and glowing in the bowl, would begin to recount tales of their youth when they were part of the

locust-army of axe-men that had swept through the land and in some strange way had left standing the great tree at the end of our farm. Then lessons were forgotten, and we children drew silently close to the fire, as, big-eyed and flushed with adventure, we entered the enchanted halls of Romance. Sometimes it was a tale of the bear that my father met on a lonely road at night, or of the spring-gun which Mr. Lane had set and which had killed a neighbour's pig, for which offence he had been up before the magistrate; or of wolverines howling along dismal lake-shores in the moonlight, or the soft pit-pat of a panther's footfall close to the trail, but always along side, or of the tracks of a giant windigo which broke up the lumber camp at Carse's Ferry. And after such a night I would crawl to bed, trembling at every creak of the loose boards of my attic floor, and pull the clothes over my head so that even the moon might not seek me out.

It was when I was fourteen, and about to enter the mill, that mother was taken sick. I had never known mother to be sick, and it was hard to understand the silent house and the darkened room. Mrs. Lane came over and took charge, and Marjorie stayed at home from school to help.

One day as I came up the path Marjorie met me with, "Mother wants you," so I went into the room. Father was there; it seems he had not gone to the mill that afternoon. He was sitting on a chair with his elbows resting on his knees and his cheeks between his hands, and a stray beam of light from the afternoon sun fell through the window and across his forehead. I wondered that I had never noticed before how old he was.

"Is that you, Laddie?" my mother called in a thin, weak voice, and I came beside the bed. "My boy, my boy!" she said, and her face worked strangely, but she could say nothing more than just "My boy." Then I knelt beside her, not knowing what else to do, and she put one of her thin hands in my hair, and ran her fingers slowly, with a strange sort of caressing, up and down and about my head. And then an odd thing happened. She began to sing, in a strange, high, tremulous key, "The Lord is my Shepherd." She did not sing it as you have heard it in church, but with a gentle, rhythmic beat, like a lullaby, just as she had sung it to me many a time when I was a little child. After a while she seemed to fall asleep, and I slipped out again. Father had never moved, but beads of sweat were standing on his forehead.

Marjorie met me, round-eyed and pale, at the door. "Oh, Frank! Is mother going—is mother going—to die?" The last words were breathed rather than spoken.

"I don't know," I said, pushing by her and gulping at something in my throat. . . .

After mother's death Marjorie had to stay at home from school and take charge of the house. Marjorie had a vast native ability behind her deep black eyes, and in a short time matters were running as smoothly as could be hoped. I took a job in the mill—my dream of being a locomotive engineer had vanished almost with my baby teeth—and I was now working from seven in the morning until six at night for a consideration of three dollars a week. My father earned ten dollars a week, so we were in easy circumstances. There were no picture shows to tempt our spare quarters, nor automobiles to make us envious of our more fortunate neighbours.

Jack Lane also took a job in the mill, when I did. We graduated into long trousers together, and made our youthful excursions, arm in arm, into the town on Saturday nights. Jack was a handsome boy, with the fair skin and hair of his sister Jean, and many a coquettish eye was turned on him as we strolled about the little town, or even as he worked at his post in the mill. But while Jack was by no means above a mild flirtation, he used to dismiss such events with the comprehensive remark, "They're not in the class of Marjorie—or Jean."

We were eighteen when the accident happened to Peter Lane. He was working about a shaft, as he had done perhaps a thousand times before, when some loose end of his clothing lapped around it. He clutched the shaft and whirled with it until the strength of his arms gave way; then his body flew out and his head struck a beam. . . . Outside the mill-wheel placidly sprayed its mist of jewels as from the hand of a fairy prince.

I need not follow the events of the next year or so further than to say that my father developed a habit of putting on his good clothes in the evening and brushing his shoes, and walking over to see whether Mrs. Lane might not need some help with the affairs of the farm.

Jack found me one evening in September cutting firewood in the uncleared portion of our farm up by the big pine. The sun was almost setting; it hung like a blood-red globe through an avenue of maple trees, and its slanting light struck the autumn foliage with a wizardry of color and beauty. Jack sat down on a log and when I paused in my work he said, "You're too industrious, Frank; if you are not careful you'll die rich. Come over here; I want to talk to you."

I took a seat at his side, and for a minute or two he punched the earth with a stick, as though uncertain how to open his subject.

"I guess you're as much awake as I am, Frank," he said at length, "so you know what's on the books."

"You mean about my father?" I was going to add, "and your mother," but I stopped; somehow it seemed out of place. But Jack filled it in,—"And my mother."

Then we both sat silent for awhile.

"Has he said anything about it to you?" I ventured, "He hasn't mentioned it to me."

"No," said Jack. Then, with one of his unexpected touches of humor,—"I'm not sure that he knows about it yet. But mother does."

"Well, it's all right, isn't it?" I said, after we had had our laugh. "Your mother has been pretty much a mother to Marjorie and me since our own left us. She's O.K. I'm not complaining."

"Neither am I," Jack agreed, "so far as they are concerned. But just how about us? We've got to get out."

"Why?"

Jack turned his full blue eyes on me with a sort of pity. "Do you think Marjorie is going to play second fiddle to a new mother? You don't know your sister, Frank."

In a moment I knew he was right. He had not asked me if I thought that Jack would play second fiddle to a new father, but that, too, may have been in his mind.

"Well, what are we to do about it?"

"Go west!" he said, emphatically. "Go west! I am beginning to think it's the only thing for a young fellow to do, anyway. What is there here for us? Drudge away in the mill, seven to six, seven to six, seven to six, week in, month in, year in; then, some day, caught on a shaft, and they stop the mill just long enough to untangle your remains. And that is life! By God, Frank, it's *not* life—as I see it—as I'm going to see it!"

I turned to him in surprise; it was the first time I had heard him use such an expression. His teeth were set; his thin lips were pressed together; his eyes were big and luminous in the twilight; his pose was a picture of resolution, even of defiance. All unknown to me, Jack Lane had become a man, and his exclamation had had more of prayer than of profanity in it.

Presently he continued: "We can go out to that new country, west of Manitoba, and take up a homestead each. In a few years we will have land enough to make a dozen of these Ontario farms. Others are doing it—so can we. And it won't be so hard for us. The worst thing, usually, is the loneliness; holding it down in a shack, three years or more, all by one's self. But we can get claims beside each other, and, although we'll have to have separate shacks, the girls will keep house for us, so it won't be so bad."

He had touched on something which had already come into my mind. "Will the girls go?" I questioned.

"Frank," he said, and again he seemed to speak from some superior wisdom of his own, "those girls will go with us anywhere we ask them—anywhere!"

CHAPTER III.

When I laid the proposal before Marjorie, she listened with a complacency which suggested that the idea was not entirely new to her.

"I will go and keep house for you," she said, frankly, "if Jack and Jean go too."

It was Sunday afternoon before I had an opportunity to speak to Jean. We were strolling in secluded paths by the river, with bursts of autumn sunshine falling through a gently rustling canopy of gold and bronze and burnished copper and playing the rich hues of the woodland colors across the radiant mass of Jean's fair hair. She was seventeen now, and my wondering eyes had of late beheld her trim girlishness giving way to the first entrancing curves of womanhood. Her light step, her grace of motion, her clear, pink skin, her sensitive lips half parted over rows of well-formed teeth, her eyes large and dreamful, all whispered in some vague way in the ears of my boyhood that Jean was not as other girls; whispered of Jean the artist—Jean the idealist! Jean had not gone into the mill with the other girls of her age; she had continued longer at school, and then had taken up the study of music. Among the limbo of personalities which drifts into the bywaters of little towns, she had found, too, an artist; a man apparently of talent, who had sought the seclusion of our little milling centre in Ontario for reasons which were his own. He had immediately recognized the artistic strain in the girl and had bent his own genius to call it forth with no thought of reward other than the joy of seeing it grow.

"You are wonderful, Miss Lane," he had said, after the first few lessons. "You have perspective and proportion, which are the greatest things in life."

"I think I am a very stupid pupil," Jean had murmured in answer. "You are very patient with me—and all for nothing."

"For nothing! You leave me your debtor! You pay me a thousand times! You have given back to me a purpose in life—an excuse for being alive! Ah, Miss Lane, you do not know—yet—how empty a life can be. But you are an artist, and some day you will dip your brush in pain—perhaps in sorrow and regret—and after that you will *paint*. It is the law."

Jean told me these things that Sunday afternoon, and asked me if I knew what he meant. I did not; but I knew the artist had given Jean an instant's glimpse into life, and it was none the easier for me to suggest the loneliness of a homestead "somewhere west of Manitoba."

"Do you think you could dip your brush in—in the Saskatchewan?" I ventured.

She was gazing dreamily across the still river, and in the rich draperies of Autumn which were mirrored at her feet there was no fairer flower than Jean. She was the centre of a painting set against a background of nature's gorgeousness.

"I know," she said, simply. "Jack has told me. I will go, if you—and Marjorie—go."

It seemed to me that the reference to Marjorie came almost as a second thought; at any rate, I flattered myself with that idea.

We had no difficulty in persuading my father and Mrs. Lane to fall in with our ideas; in fact, they accepted our plan with some enthusiasm. Father even insisted upon selling one of the farms and giving the proceeds to establish ourselves in the West. It was little enough, as we were to learn in due course, but Jack and I had also saved something of our earnings, and during this particular fall and winter we were unusually penurious.

"Nail down every dollar," said Jack, and we all were busy with our nailing.

We had decided to make no start until the spring; this on the advice of Mr. Edgar Gaines, a young man of the town who had gone west three years before with his worldly belongings in a grain bag, and had returned wearing tailor-made clothes and a horse-shoe tie pin set with something which, in a favorable light, resembled a diamond. He had "proved up" and sold out, and was living a lordly life on the proceeds—while they lasted.

"I'm settling with myself for three years on the 'bald-headed', and I've run up quite a bill," was Mr. Gaines' explanation of his gaiety. But he was able to give us some suggestions born of experience.

"No use going in the winter," he explained, "nor too early in the spring. You can't see land until the snow is off. And you have to *see* it; otherwise you may take up a fine alkali mine. I took up my claim in winter. That's why I had to sell it in

winter."

"But don't you have to be there to put a crop in in the spring?" asked Jack, who was eager to be away.

"First crop don't amount to much, anyway," said Mr. Gaines, making sure that his tie pin was still in place, as the girls were in the company, and seemed to regard him as something of a hero. "First crop don't amount to much. Likely to be rushed in in too much of a hurry, and in a dry season you lose your seed for your pains. Better take your time; pick out a prime piece of land, get your shacks up, and start plowing. If you're pushed for money, work out for somebody for awhile the first year, or put up hay on the bald-headed; you can usually sell it to settlers next winter, and soak 'em hard, always soak 'em hard."

"On the bald-headed?" repeated Jean; "what does that mean?"

"That means the prairie," Mr. Gaines explained, "because it's as bare as a bald head, 'cept for a very short grass which makes wonderful good hay."

Armed with Mr. Gaines' generous advice we prepared to start for the West about the end of April, and, as it came about, my father and Mrs. Lane arranged a domestic event on the very day of our departure. The affair was quiet and unpretentious; ceremony in the church at eleven, and dinner at Mrs. Lane's—Mrs. Hall's, I should say—where Marjorie and Jean served, and we all tried to live in a joyous glow which was strangely shot through with streaks of unhappiness. That night at six we left for the West.

We travelled in a colonist car, and it was lucky that there were four of us, as we occupied just one section. At night we pulled the seats out, and let down the upper berth, so that there were two narrow beds. The girls had the lower one, around which we arranged an improvised curtain, and we had brought some blankets, which they spread on the wooden slats of their seats.

Jean rapped on her hard bed with her knuckles. "At least, the blankets will save the paint," she remarked facetiously.

"You're lucky," said Jack. "You should see our stone-boat."

Jack and I lay on the bare boards above. I say we lay, for during that first night there was little sleep. We were under high nervous tension, which the rhythmic clickety-click of the car-wheels could not immediately soothe. Gradually the sound droned itself into my consciousness as one word, with the accent on the last syllable—Mani-to-bah, Mani-to-bah, Mani-to-bah. Then, as I was about to fall asleep, the pent-up excitement of Marjorie and Jean would burst forth in little giggling exuberances which came rippling up to our station aloft.

It was with the morning that we really began to take stock of our surroundings. The car was full of people; the air was foul and heavy; sounds of most abandoned snoring came from various quarters. We made up our berths and opened our windows; a grey mist hung on the trees and swept by the train, but the smell of it was grateful and refreshing. We washed our hands and faces, and were glad that Mr. Gaines had suggested taking our own towels and soap. Marjorie discovered that there was a stove on which tea might be made and we breakfasted out of our lunch baskets.

By this time the other occupants of the car were astir. There were many women and children, and the degree in the social scale seemed to range from those with a considerable culture and a penchant for cleanliness to those who apparently interpreted the latter term with the greatest liberality. Several languages were spoken. Half-dressed men lolled in their berths, exposing swarthy arms and slabs of hairy chests, and slatternly women shuffled along the aisle, in imminent danger of tripping on their trailing skirts and disrobing themselves. Children whined or babbled, and, after the general disturbance of breakfast-making was over, raced up and down the aisle, occasionally tripping over a projecting foot or a suit-case, and raising a lusty but short-lived outcry.

Some of the passengers understood only the barest essentials of English, and were plainly confused over the values of a strange currency. Whenever the conductor came through the car demanding tickets, which seemed to be unnecessarily often, they received him with panicky excitement or sullen stolidity. Our little party, although inexperienced in the customs of travel, had the great advantage, which the native-born never fully appreciates, of being in its own country. We were citizens of it, and we had a well-developed Anglo-Saxon pride in what that meant. We understood the language, the currency, and the customs of the people. Brass buttons had no terrors for us. We had a general knowledge of the geography of the country through which we travelled, and we knew, with reasonable definiteness, where we were

going. We had enough money in our pockets to bring us back home, if that should be necessary. Most outstanding fact of all, we had homes to come back to, should we so desire.

And yet, with all these advantages, as the day wore on, a profound melancholy, an intense loneliness, settled upon us. During the excitement of our preparations we had not felt the strain, the lesions of breaking away from parents and friends and surroundings made dear by a thousand tender associations of childhood. But now all these things rose up within me, and filled my heart and my throat. . . .

The saving thing was the high spirits of the girls. They seemed to look upon the whole trip as a romantic adventure in which Jack and I, as their young knight-errants, were cast for a somewhat heroic part. For the most part our heroism was limited to the buying of fruit, sandwiches, and coffee while the train changed engines at divisional points.

"What a breakfast!" chortled Marjorie on the second morning out. "I have had over ten miles of sausages!"

"And I have just had three telegraph poles of tea," said Jean, setting her cup down. "When shall we see a Mounted Policeman?"

"Time enough," said I. "You may fall into their hands before you know it."

Jean eyed me roguishly. "Do you think there's a chance?" she murmured. "That's one of the attractions of the country which you didn't mention."

After two days and two nights we passed through Winnipeg. It was in the grey of dawn, and we did not get off, but through the window we caught a glimpse of lines of lights down a wide and winding street.

Daylight saw us on the prairies; not the "bald-headed," to be sure, but the well settled country of the Portage Plains, where industry was already fructifying in trim houses and barns, and orderly, well-kept farms. And yet here and there was now the unbroken sweep of the prairies, and our eyes danced and something caught our breath as we tried to imagine what they meant. We knew what it was for men to spend their lives in clearing ten, twenty, or forty acres, but here lay a kingdom fresh from the hand of God and ready for the plow. And a piece of that kingdom in the still farther West—320 acres of that kingdom—was to be ours!

"And as much more as I can buy from year to year," said Jack, as though picking up the thread of our thoughts, his face alive with enthusiasm. "Boy!" he said, banging me on the knee, "there's no limit; there's no limit!" I clasped his hand in mine with a pressure that told more than words.

At Brandon we got off to stretch our legs while they changed engines and filled the ice-boxes. It was the last day of April, and the station lay in a yellow flood of lazy spring sunshine. Against the railing which bordered the platform lounged groups of young men in shirt sleeves and overalls, easy-going types of farm laborers waiting for a job to hunt them down. The girls had gone a little ahead, and as they passed such a group a young fellow in high boots and with a blue shirt open about his hairy neck intercepted them with the remark, "Hello, girls; looking for a man?"

Jean turned a contemptuous nose in the air, and would have gone straight on, but Marjorie stopped, riveted the inquirer with those flashing eyes of hers and said, "Yes; is there one anywhere about?"

The young man threw up his arms as though to admit that the thrust was too much for him, and the girls walked on, while from the lounging groups came loud guffaws intended as a tribute to Marjorie's wit, and more largely, to the goodwill which the group bore toward these two young girls in particular, and to all girls in general.

"I couldn't have said that," said Jean, when they were out of earshot. "I wouldn't have dared."

"Pshaw!" said the worldly-wise Marjorie, "there's nothing to those fellows. I could make any one of them eat out of my hand."

"I believe you could," said Jean.

All that day we continued through the prairies, with here and there a belt of scrubland to cut across the vision. All that day we rambled more and more in the field of fancy—happy imaginings of the things we would do with those farms of ours which lay out there, somewhere to the westward, waiting only to be claimed. And as evening came on we watched our first prairie sunset. There were no quick dusk and darkness, as in the East; the sun hung long in the western sky, and

as it descended swung steadily to the northward. As it fell feather-like ruffles of cloud almost overhead burst to color in the richest mauves and crimsons, and long ribbons in the west floating like golden islands in a sea of amber, caught the glow and silently unfolded a glory of pink and yellow and orange and crimson and burnished brass. Silently and slowly the sun dipped into the prairies as into a world-wide sea, but the sunset continued; long after the great orb itself had disappeared, its radiance filled the western heavens, and even while the grey twilight gathered behind us our train seemed speeding forward into a lake of saffron and champagne.

I turned to look at Jean. She sat by the window where the yellow light blocked out her fine profile against the drab background of the car, and mingled in the richer yellow of her hair. And her blue eyes were all a-glisten, as the long, fine lashes drooped and rose and drooped and rose. And in the corner of her eye I saw a little pearl gather and grow until, unrestrained, it stole across her cheek.

"Regina!" shouted Jack; "Regina!" springing to his feet and beginning to gather up our effects, for we had agreed that this should be the base of our search for land. We were ready to disembark by the time the train had come to a stop, and our first glimpse of the prairie city was that of buildings silhouetted against a saffron sky, and wide streets and open spaces and the foundation-work of the metropolis that was to be. Gaines had recommended an hotel, and we were soon located for the night.

CHAPTER IV.

Jack and I were early about in the morning, intent upon making our prospecting arrangements. We asked a casual question of an early morning lounging at a livery stable—some of these fellows seemed to get up at daylight for the express purpose of lounging—and he flung his voice over his shoulder into the recesses of the barn. "Jake!" he called; "two guys here to see you."

Jake was evidently feeding his horses, for we heard the rustle of hay and caught a whiff of its fragrance, but presently he came stumping down the main thoroughfare between the stalls. He was a short man with an over-developed waist line—quite the opposite of the lean and lanky Westerner our imaginations had been picturing. Although it was still early and there was a nip to the air of the first morning in May, he wore neither coat nor waistcoat nor collar nor tie, and the neckband of his shirt was unbuttoned and revealed a generous expanse of throat and chest. He had recently been clean shaven, and he chewed tobacco with great gusto; tiny streamlets of the seductive fluid wound their way through little creases in his flesh which seemed to have been cut for the purpose from the corners of his mouth to the bottom of his chin.

"Well," he said, bringing his weight to a poise on his pudgy feet, and scrutinizing us closely through shrewd, half-closed eyes. "You fellows lookin' fer land?"

"That's what," said Jack, who was already beginning to pick up some of the direct vernacular of the West. "We want a man who knows the country to show us about."

"I'm your gazabo," said Jake, stuffing a fist in a trouser pocket and bringing forth a half-eaten plug of tobacco, from which he helped himself liberally. Then, evidently in sudden embarrassment over his bad manners, he exclaimed, "Pardon me; my mistake!" and extended the plug to Jack and me. We declined.

"As I was sayin', I'm the original Kid McCoy when it comes to locatin' land," he continued, when satisfied that we really did not chew tobacco, and that there was no offence in our refusal. "I know every badger-hole from Estevan to Prince Albert. I know every patch of stink-weed from Arcola to Swift Current. I've driv this country till there ain't a coyote between Montana an' the Saskatch'wan river but knows the rattle o' my bone-shaker. You boys hit luck with your first throw—runnin' into me like this." Then, with a sharp squint through his half-closed eyes, and dropping his voice to a confidential note, "How much money you got?"

"Enough," said Jack, "but none to waste. What are your rates?"

Jake seemed to be turning a problem heavily in his mind. "I like you fellows," he said at length, "and I make you a special price. Usual I get seven dollars a day an' found fer drivin', an' fifty dollars for locatin'. That's fer each gent. Now I calls you two boys one gent an' makes you the same price—seven bones an' a grub-stake whether we hit oil or not, an' fifty plunks extra if we do. An' we will. No question about that. I know two claims that's jus' sittin' up an' yelpin' fer you lads to come along."

We withdrew and talked the matter over for a few minutes. In spite of Jake's unprepossessing appearance and boastful language there was something appealing about him. He threw out a bluff, frank, independent suggestion of friendliness which reacted readily upon us, and he looked like a man who knew the country. We returned presently with our minds made up.

"We'll take your offer, Mr. ——" Jack commenced.

"Jake," he interrupted. "No mister."

"All right, Jake, we'll take your offer. When do we start, what do we take, and where do we go?"

Jake looked interrogatively at the morning sun. Then, "Had breakfast?" he demanded.

"No."

"Well, fill up. You must be feelin' pretty well bored out after your trip. I'll start get the outfit together. I got a team of buckskins that's tougher than Little Eva in an Uncle Tom's Cabin show, an' a democrat bone-shaker that scuds across the prairie like the shadow of a cloud." (He had his poetic turns, had Jake). "I got a tent, but you'll need your own blankets.

After breakfast we'll go over to a store an' buy a lay-out o' grub."

"How long will we be away?"

"Well, nat'rally we have to figger on driving out a good spell. Ain't no free land nowhere close to a city, a C-I-T-Y"—he spelled it out, with a whimsical mixture of pride and ridicule—"like this. Now I've a spot in my mind I think'll suit you boys right down the calf of the leg. It'll take us about three days to go, an' a day to look it over, an' three days to come back, which knocks the hell out o' a week, don't it? An' it might be longer."

"You see, we have our sisters here. We have to give them some idea——"

"Sisters!" Jake exclaimed, evidently in some panic. "They ain't goin' along?"

"No. They'll stay here until we get settled."

"That's all right, then," said Jake, visibly relieved. "Well, you tell 'em a week or ten days."

We related the morning's transactions to the girls, who accepted the situation with resignation, as it had been agreed that they would stay in Regina while we did our prospecting. They would at once set about to find cheaper lodgings, or a couple of rooms where they could keep house; they insisted that they were quite able to shift for themselves. They would leave word of their new location at the hotel.

The forenoon was well gone by the time we had finished our arrangements and bought our "grub", which consisted mainly of canned goods and other preparations that would not spoil in the heat. The democrat was a two-seated affair, and the tent and supplies were bundled on behind, or laid in the bottom. We noted that Jake added a rifle to the equipment. Then we started off, Jack in the front seat with the driver, and I alone behind.

For most of that day we drove through a country of almost absolutely level prairie, save for occasional rough spots which Jake described as "buffalo wallows", which threatened to throw us out of the "bone-shaker", as the buckskins never changed their pace, evidently still supposing that the democrat was following them like the shadow of a cloud. Jake told us that the buffalo wallows were once wet spots on the prairie where the buffalo came to roll in the mud, which had afterwards been baked hard by the sun. We did not know whether to accept this at face value, as it was not easy to tell when Jake was to be taken at par, but we agreed that that was a satisfactory explanation, and did not enter into a discussion. Through this country there were many evidences of prosperity and of the fertility of the soil, but Jake assured us that there was nothing to be had here, and in any case it was not to be compared with what we would find further on. The Westerner has a faith, which amounts almost to a religion, that there is always something better farther on.

During the day we discovered, also, that our guide was something of a philosopher. He had many shrewd remarks to make about immigrants, and homesteaders, and the business of settling up a country. It appeared that he had no very regular scale for his services. This came out in his account of the location of a young Englishman whom he described as Mr. Spoof.

"He had a carload of baggage," said Jake, with Western extravagance of language, "and when I suggested that he start up a second-hand clothing store he said, 'Ah, I'm afraid you're spoofin' me.' So I named him Mr. Spoof, an' he gets mail now addressed that way."

It seemed that Mr. Spoof had been inquiring in one of the hotels where he could cash a draft for sixty pounds when Jake took him in tow. "I knew that was no place for him—an' sixty pounds," said Jake, "so I hustled him out an' planted him on as slick a piece of farm land as ever grew a gopher. 'How much is your fee?' said he, very courtly, when it was all fixed up.

"Sixty pounds,' says I, knowin' in advance the size of his wad.

"My word!" says he. 'Isn't that a bit thick?'

"Thick nothin'!" says I. 'Here I gets you a hundred an' sixty acres of land, as good as lies out doors, an' a chance to be a farmer, an' have your own stock an' herds an' house an' barn an' a wife an' a half-a-dozen kids—whad'ye expect for sixty pounds?'

"It's a bit thick,' he kep' on sayin'.

"See here,' says I. 'If you think this is a bit thick, as you call it, pay me the sixty pounds now, an' in three years bring me the title to your farm, an' I'll give you back your sixty pounds, an' not charge you a cent for the use of the land for those three years.' That seemed to shush 'im, an' he coughed up."

We laughed over the story. "I suppose you get them here as green as grass," I ventured.

"Oh, terrible, terrible," Jake agreed gravely. "An' in most unexpected places. But jus' you watch out!" he continued with a strange sharpness. "I took his sixty pounds because there was a dozen sharks on his trail, and he might as well give it to me fer somethin' as to them fer nothin'. But jus' you watch out that in ten or twenty years he don't have *you* beat to a custard. Dang me! I can't explain it, but there's somethin' in those fellows that won't go down—an' stay down. That is, most of 'em. Course there's failures everywhere," he added, generously. "They don' count."

"But do you think it quite fair," said Jack, and I knew that he was bantering our guide, or wanting to draw out his conclusions,—"do you think it quite fair to charge different fees for the same service?"

"Fair as fightin'," Jake declared. "It's like this. You go into the butcher's an' you order a cut of steak, an' he sets you back six bits, an' it doesn't matter whether it's you or me or the king—six bits is the price. That's business. But you go into a lawyer's or a doctor's an' what does he do? Looks you up an' down an' figgers out in his mind what you can damn-well pay, an' that's what he soaks you. That's a perfession. Locatin' homesteads is a perfession."

With this explanation of the ethics of his "perfession" we had to be satisfied. As the day wore on, the sun, pouring through a cloudless sky as clear as space, and the fresh wind which blew steadily in our faces, began to have effect, and we felt a smarting, tingling sensation over our cheeks and across our noses and chins. Jake had provided against this contingency with a box of axle grease; not the daintiest cosmetic, but a cheap and effective one. He now produced the box with the instructions, "Plaster it on. Don't be afraid of it."

We did so, somewhat gingerly, and laughed whenever we looked in each other's faces.

Jake turned in to a farm place in mid-afternoon for water. We could see the farmer seeding in his field; he made no stop on our account, and if he had a wife she remained indoors. We pumped as much water as the horses would drink, and filled our water keg, and then sat for a while in the shade of one of his buildings, chewing at straws and gazing into the blank distance. There was a supreme satisfaction, a fine relaxation and relief, in idling in such an hour. I was impressed with the off-hand way in which we seemed to have taken possession of the man's farm, and his complete indifference to our presence.

"Some people say," said Jake at length, yawning and digging his heels in the ground preparatory to getting up, "some people say that the Indian is a fool, an' the Indian says the white man is a fool. On a day like this I al'us reckon the Indian has a little the best o' the argyment."

He pulled his team out from the side of a haystack, where they had been feeding with as little concern as if the hay were their own, and presently we rattled off down the trail again. On the way we passed the field in which the farmer was seeding. We waved our hats at him, and from the distance he waved his hat back at us, and we drove on into the prairies.

On account of our afternoon rest Jake drove until almost sundown. We were now in a slightly rolling country, and suddenly he swung from the trail and pulled up on the top of a little knoll. From this little vantage point we could see the unbroken sweep of the prairies, miles and miles in every direction.

"Is this the bald-headed?" I asked in a low voice, as though touching on something almost sacred.

"This is the bald-headed," he answered, solemnly. "See, everywhere, sky an' grass—sky an' grass. Ah, there, there's an exception." I followed the line of his extended arm. Far across the plains I saw a flashing light, as of a heliograph.

"The window of a settler's shanty, twenty miles from here, if it's a foot," he explained. "Look how green the grass is. The evenin' light makes it that way, somehow."

It was true. The grass had taken a deeper shade of green with the light falling aslant across it. The sun hung like a yellow ball in a sky of champagne, and the long shadows of our horses and wagon stretched down the slope of the little hill. But

most impressive of all was the silence, a silence as of heaven and earth brooding, brooding, brooding over this scene as they had done from the dawn of time; aye, and before that, far into the vague aeons of eternity. . . . I wished that Jean might have been there.

We made our camp on the hill, if we can be said to have made camp at all. Jake found a little slough (pronounced *slew*) of snow water not far away, and he unharnessed his horses and hobbled them nearby. I was fussing with the tent when he returned.

"We won't need that, son," and I thought there was a note almost of affection in his voice that made me warm to the man. "It couldn't rain to-night on a bet. Clean out the wagon an' you two boys sleep on the floor of it. You get the benefit o' the springs that way, an' it's dryer'n the ground."

"But where will you sleep?"

"Oh, I'll roll up somewhere. I'm an old-timer."

Jake gathered some dry grass and buffalo chips and out of an astonishingly little fire he soon had the tea boiling. Then he fried bacon and laid the strips of hot bacon on slabs of bread. And we ate bacon and bread, and then jam and bread, and drank hot black tea, while the slow twilight settled down about us.

Once, only, Jake startled us by springing to his feet and running to the wagon. He slung his rifle over his arm as we heard a sort of rushing whistle in the darkness overhead.

"No use," he said, laying the weapon down reluctantly. "Wouldn't get one with a carload o' cartridges."

"What was it?" we asked. "We didn't see anything."

"Didn't you? You ain't got prairie eyes yet. Them was wild ducks, goin' north a-hootin'. Wouldn't hit one with a rifle in a million years."

"Why don't you carry a shot gun?" asked Jack.

"Sometimes a rifle is better," he answered, quietly.

As we were getting ready for bed we noticed him take up the rifle again, make sure that the magazine was charged, and even throw a cartridge into the barrel. Then he sat with it over his arm, a few yards from the wagon.

At last our curiosity became too much for us, so Jack said, "What's the idea, Jake?"

Jake was smoking now, having changed off from chewing tobacco after supper. For a moment or two he sat, puffing silently. Then he got up and walked over beside us.

"I didn't mean to say nothin' about it to you lads," he said, in a low voice. "What you don' know you don' worry over. But since you ask me, old Sittin' Crow's been givin' trouble. He's off his reserve again, with a few rash bucks followin' him, an' if he should catch us unawares he'd likely dangle three new scalps at his belt. The buckskins, the democrat, an' the grub would look mighty good to Sittin' Crow."

I felt a strange tremor run up my spine. My scalp was still in place all right; I could feel the hair rising on it.

"Why didn't you tell us sooner," Jack remonstrated. "We should have had a rifle each. What is one rifle against a band like that?"

"One rifle, if it's pointed right, will puncture old Sittin' Crow, an' that's the last thing he's hopin' fer," said Jake. "With one rifle on guard we're safe as Sunday. Now you boys go to sleep, an' I'll jus' watch the camp."

"But you can't do that!" Jack insisted. "You can't sit up on guard all night and drive all day. We'll take our turn. Won't we, Frank?"

"Of course," said I, assuming a confidence I could not feel. It was quite dark now, and a rising breeze came with an eerie note across the plains.

"Well, that's decent," said Jake, "but I couldn't let you take no such chances."

"Chances nothing!" Jack exploded. "We're in the same boat, and we're going to row together. Divide the night up, and Frank and I will take shift about."

"Well, if you insist," said Jake, reluctantly. "I'll hold it down till midnight, which is the most dang'rous time; then you can take it till three o'clock, an' Frank till six. I'll call you at midnight."

He was as good as his word. I heard them whispering in the gloom, while the stars blinked at me from a depthless heaven overhead.

"I thought I heard a noise once, down by the horses, but it must ha' been a coyote or a badger," Jake was saying. "It's jet black now, and if they haven't seen us they won't 'till daylight. I think you'll be safe enough. If you get up against it don't lose your head. Take your time; aim safe—not too high—an' let 'im have it."

Jack climbed out bravely, but I thought I felt his frame tremble as he went. I was none too happy myself. I lay awake, I don't know how long, counting the stars. Jake had made a bed of the tent on the prairie and was snoring with provoking regularity. It seemed to me that snore of his must be heard for miles through the silent night.

Suddenly Jack came rushing in upon us, falling over Jake and tumbling himself, headlong, on the ground. The rifle flew from his hands, and he was hunting about for it, frantically, in the darkness.

"It won't go off!" he shouted, in a hoarse whisper. "The damned thing won't go off!"

"Did you see him?" whispered Jake, while I, wide awake, jumped from the wagon.

"As plain as day, coming up the hill. I pulled on him, steady and low like you said, but it wouldn't go off."

Even as he spoke a dim form slowly hove in sight. I stood back with my heart thumping. It did not come fast, but its approach out of the darkness was the more terrifying for its deliberation. He was almost upon us before, evidently scenting Jake, the buckskin whinnied.

Jack was almost in collapse from excitement and mortification, but Jake rolled and doubled on his blanket with loud guffaws of merriment.

"But tell me, jokes aside," said Jack, at length, "why wouldn't the rifle go off? Suppose it had been Sitting Crow? Why wouldn't it go off?"

"Well, fer one reason," Jake explained when he could speak calmly, "I've no notion fer walkin' back to Regina, nor fer drivin' with one nag, neither. So when I took the hobbles off one o' the buckskins, figgerin' he'd likely work up here durin' the night, I also took the cartridges out o' the rifle. Can't afford to have no horse like that plunked low down, careful, in the middle."

"But suppose it really had been Sitting Crow," Jack persisted. "A nice mess we'd have been in."

"Can't suppose that," said Jake; "simply can't suppose it. Because, you see, there ain't no Sittin' Crow. Yep, some of'em is awful green," he added.

CHAPTER V.

When daylight came we had breakfast and started on our journey again in rather sheepish silence. The strain lasted for perhaps half an hour; then Jake gave a great guffaw, smothering his face in his hands.

"Yep, some of 'em is awful green," he quoted again, proving for himself a good memory as well as a sense of satire. "Jupiter!" and there was another outburst of hilarity. "Sittin' Crow!" and more guffaws. "To-night we'll be in the haunts of Roostin' Turkey! Giddap! You danged old buckskin, it's good fer you I emptied the magazine!"

Under my seat I found a tent peg. Stealthily I raised it in the air, and joyously I walloped Jake on something solid beneath his slouch felt hat. He rubbed his head ruefully, but without taking offence.

"Well, that's over," he said at length, heaving a great sigh, as though he had just been relieved of some big responsibility. "It's all in a life-time. Giddap, you piebald flyin' ants!" and Jake made a strange clucking noise in his throat which encouraged the buckskins into a temporary lopé.

The day was much the same as the one before, except that we were now well out on "the bald-headed." Once in a while, at great distances, we could see a homesteader's shack, a little isolated sentinel-box of the vanguard of settlement. Once we were intercepted by another team and democrat, much like our own, which cut across our trail. The driver asked if we could spare any water. We gave him half of what was in our keg, and he extended his plug of chewing tobacco all round. We chatted a few minutes, and then with mutual friendly shouts and waving of our arms we were off again.

During the afternoon, Jake's mind having apparently cleared of all other matters, he began to sing. It was some little time before we detected the origin of the strange sound; different times I looked down at our wheels, or glanced about to see if someone were approaching. But the volume of sound grew as Jake developed his theme, and presently there was no doubt that he was singing. We soon discovered that Jake had two songs, "Sweet Marie" and "Clementine", and he used both words and music interchangeably. As we were able to analyze it more closely we found his rendering ran something like this:

"As I clasp your hand in mine, Sweet Marie-e-e,

"A feelin' so divine comes to me, comes to me-e. Giddap, you danged buckskin, fallin' over your feet.
Goin' to sleep? Cluck, cluck!

"Lived a miner, a forty-nin'er,

"An' his daughter, Clementine."

But we were to discover that singing was not Jake's only forte. He had the most amazing eyes. They were always half asleep, and in the heat of the day they seemed more than half asleep, but he saw things long before they hove into our vision, and, I have no doubt, he saw many things that we did not see at all. In the middle of the afternoon he suddenly broke off with "Lived a min-er," and brought his horses to a stop.

"Like to try a shot at that coyote?" he said to Jack.

"What coyote?" asked Jack, looking hurriedly in all directions.

"Over there," indicating a section of the horizon with a sweep of his arm.

"Can't place him," Jack confessed.

"Beside that little mound of dirt—badger-hole, I reckon; there's a tuft of grass in front of him; he's lookin' straight at us, wonderin' who the hell——"

"Oh, I got him, I got him!" Jack shouted in a loud whisper, and began to get out of the wagon, but Jake's arm restrained him.

"Don't do that. He'll run the moment you get out. Take him from here."

He slipped the rifle over Jack's arm. "She's loaded," he said, with a grin. "Set 'er fer two hundred yards."

Jack aimed long and carefully, and even as he aimed the coyote turned his broadside deliberately, as though to give him a better target. Then he fired, and a whiff of dust puffed up three hundred yards away. The coyote, however, had taken notice; perhaps the bullet didn't pass so far above him, at that. He stretched himself like a tawny ribbon and bolted with amazing speed into the wilderness. Jack sent two more wild shots into space.

"Toler'ble safe," was Jake's comment as he laid the rifle away. "Toler'ble safe."

Half an hour later he pulled up again. "How about you?" he said, turning to me.

I could see nothing until, following the line of his arm and finger, I at length detected an object behind a little whitish willow bush, appropriately called the wolf willow. Even then I could see only a pair of sharp ears and the triangular outline of a head; there was nothing else visible.

"You better take him, Jake," I said. "You're a real shot." I felt I owed him that much for that wallop with the tent peg.

He was nothing loath to take up the rifle, and I began to realize how big a courtesy it was to offer us the first shot. He drew the gun to his shoulder, craned his neck down along the stock, steadied the barrel an instant, and fired. The coyote leaped in the air, fell on his back, kicking and pawing in the wolf willow. We drove over to him, but already his lips had curled back in a death-snarl from his gleaming teeth.

Jake drove on in silence while we meditated upon his amazing marksmanship. Any comment on our part would have been superfluous, a fact which no doubt our driver understood. But his thought was evidently running along some course similar to ours, although skirting into wider fields.

"If ever there's a big war," he remarked at length, "an' I reckon there will be some day, the chaps from these prairies will sure give 'em hell."

It was a strange speech for Jake. Jake, short and fat-waisted, guiltless of coat or waist-coat, his coarse blue shirt flying open at the neck, little streams of tobacco juice meandering down his stubby chin, his slouch hat pulled low on his head and his brown, tangled hair tufted out about the ears; most of all, his pudgy feet, which would not reach the floor of the wagon box—surely here was as unmilitary looking an individual as one could picture. And yet, his amazing keenness of eyesight, his quick, accurate, uncanny marksmanship, and his calm assurance in which there was no word of boasting, but a mere statement of fact, that if ever there were a big war the boys from the prairies would "give 'em hell!"

We camped that night by a stream of which Jake knew, because there was little water on the prairies, even at the first of May. Next day we drove all day, and later into the evening than usual; it was quite dark when we stopped.

"This is the place," Jake said, "but you can't see it to-night. Have a good sleep and we'll size 'er up in the mornin'."

We tried to eat breakfast without concern, but we were hurried and nervous, and eager to see how our judgment would tally with Jake's. On the road he had tried to explain to us the system of survey, and we had a general idea of it in our heads. Now he took a township map from his pocket and showed us in detail where we were.

"This is us," he said, pointing with a thick, stubby finger, "right on the north-west quarter o' Fourteen. Immedjut west of us is a road allowance, runnin' north an' south. Immedjut west of that again is section Fifteen, which is railroad land, an' can't be took up free. But immedjut north-west, cornerin' right against this quarter, 'cept fer the road allowance, is the south-east quarter of Twenty-two, which is open. Now these two quarters, north-west Fourteen an' south-east Twenty-two, is as good as any land that lays out o' doors, an' better than most. There's a bit of a gully here—you'll see it in a minute—runs down from the north-east an' cuts off to the south-west, an' runs right between these two quarters. There's springs in that gully somewhere, an' runnin' water practical the year round, an' shelter fer stock an' all that kind o' thing, an' you get the benefit of it all, an' it don't take two acres off'n your land. It's a plumb Paradise an' you can't beat it nowhere."

"How far is it to a railroad?" Jack asked.

"Plumb down that road allowance, thirty-two miles, straight as the crow flies, when it ain't Sittin'," he threw in with a little snicker.

"Thirty-two miles!" Jack exclaimed. "Pretty well in the wilderness, isn't it?"

"Wilderness nothin'! This is suburban prop'rty. This is close in. I take some of 'em back sixty an' seventy an' eighty miles. Thirty-two miles is jus' right, an' I'll tell you why. When a new railroad comes its likely to come about thirty miles from the other; that's about a sensible distance apart. An' here you are, in the middle of the right-of-way, an' may be cuttin' your homestead into town lots; ten lots to an acre an' two hundred dollars a lot. Can you beat it? The Lord sure has been good to you, fer no special reason that I can notice. 'Tain't your good looks"—we were badly sun-blistered, in spite of the axle-grease—"an' tain't your good sense, excep' in selectin' me as your financial advisor, so to speak. I reckon it's all account o' those girls—*sisters*, you said."

Jake threw a querying stress on the word *sisters*, but it was against all nature to be offended at him. Had we resented his remark he would have laughed our seriousness out of court. But we decided to see some of the adjoining sections.

Sixteen appealed to Jack. We could have taken the west half, and so, working together, we would have had a mile furrow. The gully also touched sixteen, and would have given us the same advantages as Jake claimed for the sections he had recommended. However, we found him very fixed in his preference for Fourteen and Twenty-two, and finally we accepted his arguments, and set out to make a more detailed survey of the land. The gully angled between the two quarters, taking scarce an acre off either of them. A jolly stream, brown with the grass of its banks, gurgled along its bed.

I knelt down to try the water; there was the taste of snow, but there was also the harder, sharper note of spring water mingled with it.

"Runnin' water like that is worth a thousand dollars on any man's farm," Jake declared. "An' come up this way. Wait till I show you somethin'."

The "something" proved to be a widening in the valley, where was a considerable growth of small willows and poplars. "Fence posts and fire wood," said Jake, "an' on railroad land too, that won't be sold fer years. You'll have 'em all cut down before then. That timber's worth another thousand, or half that, anyway."

I thought of the great pine back on the old farm in Ontario, and the "timber" looked to me like gads and switches. None of it was tall enough to reach out of the little valley and show a green tip to the bald surface of the prairies. But we were not in Ontario now; we were in a land where even a three-inch tree was not to be despised.

"An' here's somethin' more," he said, setting an example for us by walking stealthily on his pudgy legs through the clumps of willows. At the other end of the wooded space we found a little pond opening out, and a score of wild ducks drowsing placidly on its smooth surface. The bright colorings of the drakes, the beautiful archings of their necks, and their graceful movements on the water held us for a moment in silent admiration.

"An Englishman," Jake remarked, when we had turned back, "would take this farm fer the duck pond alone. They're the dangdest people ever was fer wantin' to kill somethin'. He don' care if his farm is all sand or wallows, 's long as there's somethin' to shoot, the Englishman don't. But fer a Yankee it mus' be every acre wheat land. He don' care fer nothin' but the long green." Jake paused as though to think over these national characteristics.

"I dunno which is the worst," he said at length. "I reckon us Canadjuns is about right, with a little o' both."

"It has been said that a Canadian is half Englishman and half Yankee," I remarked. "What do you make of it?"

"Nothin' to it," was Jake's emphatic answer. "When a Canadjun is enjoyin' an argyment with a Yankee he's all English, an' when he's pullin' off a deal with an Englishman he's all Yankee, an'——"

"He gets the sixty pounds," said Jack.

Jake braced himself on his short, stout legs, and made a gesture that might have been interpreted as a belligerent attitude. He ended it by flapping his arms in imitation of flying, and emitting a series of caws.

Jack was duly suppressed. "Let's get to business," he said. "Explain this soil. Will it grow anything, and if so, what?"

"Let's find a badger-hole," said Jake, and we had little trouble in locating one. "Now look at this. This hole goes down five, six, seven feet, maybe more, in the ground. Look what his nibs has kicked out. Fine, loamy, sandy soil, not too light an' not too sticky, all the way down. That goes plumb to Kingdom Come. Course, the top is a little darker, on account o' the grass roots, but it's all soil. None o' yer down-east three inches-o'-muck-an'-a-rock-bottom to that."

Jake took a fresh chew of tobacco and looked out over the greenish-brown prairie. It certainly was a picture to kindle the imagination. Almost as level as a floor, one could have seen a jack-rabbit jump anywhere within a mile. The little gully was quite lost in the vista; you would not dream of its existence until you came right upon it. In no direction was there a sign of life, but far on the horizon a whiff of smoke hung like a fading pennant in the still sky.

"I have it figgered out like this," Jake continued, "an' my figgers is right; this land is worth more than any gold mine between hell an' Whoop-up. When you take the gold out o' a mine you ain't got nothin' left, but you can take gold out o' this mine next year, an' the year after, an' the year after, fer ever an' ever, an' there's still as much there as when you started—if you farm it right."

Our inspection satisfied us in every particular. Jake explained, as we already knew, that we would have to build separate shacks on the two quarters, to comply with the law about sleeping on the land claimed. "But you can build one stable in the gully fer the live stock," he added; "the Gov'ment don' care where *they* sleep, jus' so's the homesteader himself is sufficiently oncomfort'ble."

We smiled over his interpretation of regulations which, as we knew, were necessary to prevent the wholesale blanketing of the free lands by people who had no intention of living on them.

"Now we better pick a second an' a third choice, jus' in case some one slips in ahead o' us on this," said Jake, and we spent the afternoon driving about and making fresh locations. Much of the land was already taken up, Jake told us, and although there were as yet no signs of settlement we would see a great change by fall.

Jack spoke of the disadvantage of the alternate sections of railroad land, which were not given away free, but which had to be bought. "They are an obstacle to close settlement," he said, "and I guess loneliness is about the worst thing there is to contend with on these prairies."

"Perhaps," said Jake, "but they're an advantage, too. They give the homesteader a lot of free pasture an' hay land, fer instance. An' in a few years, when you have had some good crops an' caught the bug fer big farmin', you'll be mighty glad o' the chance to buy Fifteen or Twenty-three."

We camped on Fourteen that night, and Jack and I were filled with plans for our shacks and our stable. The shacks would be up on the prairie level, on opposite sides of the gully, in full view of each other, and about a hundred yards apart. The stable would be in the gully, close to the road allowance, sheltered from the winds, and convenient to water. The crossing of the stream was passable, but would stand improvement.

Early in the morning we started back, and after three full days in the democrat we found ourselves one evening swinging up the now strangely familiar streets of Regina. The raw prairie city of 1904 already almost seemed like home. We were like travelers returning from strange lands to scenes of old recollections. We had been away just seven days, but in that time we had swung far out into the universe; we had drunk of the air of God's new creation; we had been strangely conscious of the company of our souls. We arranged with Jake to meet him in the morning, when he would go with us to the land office while we registered our claims, and at the hotel we found a note from the girls giving us their new address. We located them without trouble; I fancy they had not known that seven days could be so long. They had no room for us, so we had to go back to the hotel, but first we sat with them late into the night, recounting our adventures and picturing to them the place that was to be our home; kindling in them, if we could, some fire of the joy of ownership which was already leaping in our breasts.

In the morning we went with Jake to the land office; Fourteen and Twenty-two in the township where we had decided to locate were still open, and we had no difficulty in filing our claims. We returned to the stable with Jake.

"What's the damage?" Jack demanded.

Jake expectorated profusely, spread his feet, and scratched his head. "Seven times seven is forty-nine; fifty dollars fer locatin' makes ninety-nine; I guess she's ninety-nine, boys; gosh darn it, we might have made it a hundred."

"My word!" said Jack. "Isn't that a bit thick?"

There was a merry twinkle in the guide's half-closed eyes. "An' two girls to go out there with you? Whad'ye expec' fer your money? But I was forgettin' about Sittin' Crow. I'll throw off four dollars fer Sittin' Crow. It was worth it."

But we paid him the ninety-nine and Jack threw in another. "We'll make it the even hundred," he said. "Come out and see us when you get a chance; we may have a bite of fried coyote for you."

"Oh, I'll be along, I'll be along," said Jake. "I'll blow out there often."

We shook hands with Jake and turned away with a strange feeling of cutting ourselves adrift. We had not known how quickly an attachment may grow—on the prairies.

CHAPTER VI.

If we thought we had finished with Jake it was evidence that we still had much to learn about our guide's business qualities. Jake had a follow-up peculiarly his own, and that afternoon he came steaming into our presence as we sat in the bare lounge-room of the hotel, making a list of necessities on the back on an envelope.

"I been chasin' you fellows all over hellan-gone," he announced, with a profuse expectoration to facilitate speech. "I got a fistful o' luck fer you. Chap down at the stables—trouble o' some kind or other—wants to sell his horses; as pretty a team o' bays as ever switched a tail in fly-time, an' I can put you next."

"That's good of you," said Jack, "but we've just figured that we can't afford horses. It's a case of horses and no cow, or oxen and a cow, and the vote at the moment stands unanimous for milk to our porridge, even at the risk of our characters. They tell us that even a good man swears when he drives oxen."

"That's wrong," Jake corrected. "A good man don' drive oxen. He may be good *before* he drives them, but not *while* he drives them, nor immedjut afterwards. It's agin human nature. I've seen profanity on some o' the ox trails o' this country so thick it lay jus' like a fog on the prairie. You could jus' see the top tier o' the box," he added, with a touch of artistry. "Oxen has started more fellows on the wrong road than any other critturs—'cept women."

"Well, we're going to take a chance with both," was Jack's answer. "You don't happen to have a hard-up friend who would part with a yoke of oxen, for a consideration, do you?"

Jake scratched his tousled hair meditatively. "Come to think o' it, I believe I do," he said at length. "I jus' remember a chap who was talkin' o' sellin' his oxen t'other day. As sleek a yoke as ever switched a tail in fly-time; gentle, an' strong, an' speedy as a scairt rabbit. I reckon I could get you a special price on 'em, pretendin' it was meself that was buyin'."

"And a cow," I ventured. "Have you a cow on your bargain list?"

"Jake has everything on his bargain list that we may happen to need," said Jack. "Everything from a cow to a cook-stove. It's all right, Jake; we don't mind your little graft so long as you play the game half fairly, and see that we get at least fifty cents' worth on the dollar. Buying on our own judgment we would probably get less than that."

So it was arranged that Jake was to be our purchasing agent, with a sort of gentleman's understanding that he might cheat us a little in consideration of his services in preventing other people from cheating us a great deal. The arrangement, I believe, worked out to our advantage. Jake undoubtedly bought our supplies for less than we could have bought them, even after providing his secret commissions. Moreover, he knew what was essential and what was not, and he saved us valuable time.

When at last our outfit was complete it presented a picturesque and somewhat pathetic turn-out. On our wagon we had built a temporary box of boards, and on this were piled our trunks and personal effects, a plow, a stove, food supplies, a tent, a crate with hens and another with a young pig, while over all roosted, if I may use the term, the two girls. The cow we tied behind, while Jack and I walked as a sort of flank guard on either side of the oxen. These two phlegmatic creatures rejoiced in the names of Buck and Bright, and stoically pursued their destiny at a pace of two-and-a-half miles an hour. Their resignation in adversity was sublime; in fact, we soon found it impossible to invent any adversity to which they were not resigned.

Jake saw us off, and we remonstrated with him over the speed, or rather the lack of speed, of which his highly recommended oxen gave evidence. "You said they had the speed of a scared rabbit," Jack reproached him.

"So they have," said Jake, barefacedly. "When a rabbit's plumb scairt he can't move at all; he jus' humps up an' prays. When Buck an' Bright come to that don' disturb 'em in their devotions; jus' wait fer the spirit to move 'em."

With such an outfit our progress was much slower than it had been with Jake and his "flyin' ants," but it was an experience of unbounded freedom and delight. The days held bright and warm, as it was still too early for the May rains; the nights were cold and starry, with a tang of frost toward morning; the dawns were a rush of color, and the sunsets indescribable. It was an unfolding experience, like the opening of some spring flowers; at times I caught a half wistful, wondering, yearning look in Jean's eyes quite different from anything I had known before. I saw no such glimpse in the

eyes of Marjorie, or of Jack; but there it was in Jean's, and, I believe, in mine. Vaguely we two understood; vaguely we felt the stirrings of the soul which refuses to be silenced amid the glories of its Maker. And because we vaguely understood, some fine thread of eternal purpose seemed to wrap itself about our hearts and draw us closer and closer as the days went by.

At nights we pitched the tent and made down blankets for the girls, but Jack and I slept under the stars. We were roughing it, but every muscle in our young bodies was vibrating with the tense new life of the open. The smell of spring flowers was in our nostrils; the whip of spring winds about our cheeks; the myriad murmurings of the little lives of spring crept up through the silences. When the girls called us to breakfast of fried bacon and potatoes and steaming coffee and milk from our traveling dairy we were more happy and more hungry than anything we had ever known to be possible.

And the girls! We saw them growing browner every day, but with their sunburn they seemed to take on a strange new charm and competence. They treated the whole experience as a high adventure, and after cramped hours on the top of "the ark" they would race like wild things across the prairies, their hair flying in the breeze, and a vagrant wind tossing the skirts about their shapely limbs.

They had taken the precaution to provide themselves with sunbonnets and a better cosmetic than axle-grease, but the prairie sun is an impetuous lover, and their cheeks and lips showed the mark of his caresses. He was a rival who did not pique my jealousy, for in his embrace I saw the woman Jean bursting forth from the bud of girlhood in a beauty that kept my blood a-tingle.

The prairies were a never-ceasing source of delight and wonder. Almost over-night, it seemed, they had blossomed out in myriads of flowers, mauve and yellow, so thick that at places they almost hid the grass from sight. The girls plucked handfuls of them and arranged the downy stems in the bands of their sunbonnets. Saucy gophers mounted the little dumps of moist earth in front of their burrows and sent their shrill whistle defiantly forth, save when a well-aimed clod from Jack or me brought the note to an end in a sudden sharp crescendo, accompanied by a flicker of a jaunty tail as the owner took refuge underground. In a moment, if we watched, we would see his sharp eyes levelled on us through the grass at the mouth of his burrow, or perhaps he would appear from another exit and send forth his shrill challenge more saucily than ever. Coyotes we frequently saw; a badger once or twice, and one day figures at a great distance which we took to be antelope. Innumerable ducks flew overhead, and the nights were at times almost sleepless with the clanging of wild geese, wedging their way to the nesting grounds in the north.

There was just one note that bothered me. It was sounded a day or two after we left Regina in some covert remark which Marjorie made about Jean's Mounted Policeman. It seemed that while Jack and I had been away land hunting the girls, too, had been doing a little prospecting. Regina was the headquarters of the Mounted Police, and the fine figures of these young riders of the plains with their scarlet tunics and trim gold ribbed riding trousers and clanking spurs have turned more heads than Jean's before and since. It seems the girls were walking along a business street when they saw a young policeman coming at a short distance, and they happened to stop to admire something in a window while he approached. He also stopped to admire, and Marjorie said something—which Jean would not have done—and a conversation started up, and the policeman seemed to prefer Jean, perhaps because she had not spoken first. At any rate he saw them safely home, and dallied over his responsibility and the gate post until they said they must go in. He called the next night and wanted to take them to a "show", but they would not go; at any rate, Jean would not go.

"But you went walking with him," Marjorie challenged.

"He asked you, too," said Jean, her pretty face colouring. "You started with us, and then went back."

"I saw how the land lay, or the wind blew, or whatever it was. I had nothing to do at home, but I knew I would be busier there than out walking with you and your policeman."

"Marjorie! How *can* you——"

"And he told her he would call on her after we were settled."

"He did no such thing! He asked me where we were going to settle, and I told him I didn't know, and he said he hoped he would be patrolling there. He's going to be sent out from barracks soon, and he said it would be safer for me—for us—if someone were patrolling our district."

"Not for you, dear," said Marjorie, meaningly, and there was a little sting in her words which brought me into action.

"I believe you're jealous, Marjorie," I said, in tones intended to be severe.

"And aren't you?" she retorted. "You ought to be."

The truth is, I was. Jean had always belonged to me so absolutely that I had never thought of the possibility of a rival. Even now I did not think of such a thing seriously. It was true that there was no engagement between us, unless the word of a man of six and a woman of four can be taken as binding, but I looked on Jean as mine, nevertheless, and I resented the action of the Mounted Policeman in seeking her acquaintance. I resented, too, the fact that she had gone walking with him, and I told her so at the first opportunity.

It came that afternoon. Jean said she was tired riding, and got down to walk, on my side of the wagon. We trudged along for some distance in silence, save for my occasional words of rebuke and exhortation to the oxen.

"You're cross at me," she said at length.

"I'm not." Why I said that I can't imagine, I was, and I wanted her to know it.

"I didn't mean to offend you," she went on. "Marjorie was just a little bit—spiteful."

"I know she was," I agreed. "But you shouldn't have gone walking with him."

"Why?"

"He was a stranger. You didn't even know his name."

"I do now. It's Harold Brook. Besides, in this country, you don't have to know people's names. You just speak anyway."

"Oh, do you?" I said, sarcastically. "So I see."

"Don't be cross," she coaxed. "See, I can beat you to that badger-hole. One—two—three—"

She was off like the wind. For a moment I hesitated, then joined in the race. But she had too much start, and besides, she was almost a match for me. She reached the little mound first, and as she turned she swerved a little from her course, and I happened to plunge into her. To save herself from falling she seized me about the neck, and her hair brushed against my face.

We walked back slowly, arm in arm, and I had a sense of being very much of a brute. . . . Jean had wound me around her little finger.

So the days and nights went by. The sun was almost setting on the eighth day, and the prairie, now gorgeous in its spring fluffery of anemones, had taken on its evening richness of green when we at length drew up close to the bank of the gully on Fourteen. For an hour or more we had been straining our eyes for a glimpse of the promised land, but as it looked exactly the same as all the other land for miles around we could not be sure of Fourteen until the gully came into view. Then we threw up our hats and rushed ahead, leaving the oxen to come as they chose. They chose not to come at all, and Buck actually lay down in the road.

There are certain thrills of accomplishment, certain epochs of development, which come only once in a life-time. One of these is when a young man writes his first cheque, or first turns his key in his own door, or first sees his name on an office signboard. But the greatest is when he first looks upon land he can call his own. True, this land was not yet ours, but it was pledged to us if we carried out our part of a very simple agreement, and already we had a proprietary interest in it. We showed it to the girls with the pride of a mother displaying her first born. We were desperately anxious that our choice should be justified.

We waited for their verdict, but neither spoke. "Well, what do you think of it?" Jack asked at length.

"It looks all right," said Marjorie. "I suppose it is as good as any. But I don't see how you are going to tell it from other people's land. It's all alike."

"What do you say, Jean?"

But Jean was looking at the sunset, where the Master Artist was splashing pastels of bronze and copper against a background of silver and champagne. "Wonderful, wonderful!" she murmured.

"Fourteen is Frank's and Twenty-two is mine," Jack explained. "We'll pitch the tent for the girls here, and Frank may do as he likes, but I'm going to cross the gully and sleep to-night under my own vine and fig-tree, so to speak. My six months' residence begins to-night!"

"Fig-tree!" Marjorie exclaimed. "The trees around here are just about high enough to tickle your ear—when you're lying down."

"You haven't seen the trees yet," said Jack, knowingly. "Now, let's pitch camp."

We went back to the wagon, but Buck positively refused to be disturbed. Neither coaxing, nor proddings, nor pullings, nor pushings, were of any avail; get up he would not.

"He's a squatter," said Jack. "A genuine squatter, and he refuses to be dispossessed. We must work around him." So we unhitched Bright, and by great effort unharnessed Buck, and left him until the spirit should move him. We dragged the tent close to the brow of the gully and pitched it on the spot where we had planned that my shack should be. We also unloaded part of our equipment so that we could make use of it in the housekeeping operations. It was with great zest that we carried our cookstove to the door of the tent and strung up two or three lengths of pipe. In a few minutes Jack appeared from somewhere with an armful of bits of wood, and as the darkness settled down we gathered about a fire on our own farms, for the first time in our lives.

The girls unpacked some of the supplies, and I was commissioned to milk our cow, and presently Marjorie was flip-flapping pancakes on the "spider" with the art of a mature housewife. "We should have sour milk for these," she protested, as she served the first helping.

"If that cow had been much longer on the road I think she would have been able to supply you," I ventured. "She has been looking sadder every day."

"She's a great institution. Henceforth I consider a cow as necessary a part of travel equipment as a suit-case."

And so we chattered on, saying nothing of moment, but feeling the great joy of possession welling in our hearts. It was a day and a night to be lived over many a time in memory. For the first time in our lives we were drinking of the wells of possession,—the enchanted streams which draw men and women into the wilderness to live and die on the outposts of civilization.

We had finished supper, and the grey gloom of twilight was crawling slowly up from the east when a sharp, whistling rustle almost above us brought the girls to their feet with a start.

"What was that!" Jean exclaimed. "It was almost like a bullet."

"Nay, nay," said Jack, indulging in a very sorry joke. "It is a ducklet."

"A ducklet? What ducklet?"

"That, my dear sister, was the whistle from the wing of a wild duck, darting into the darkness at a couple of hundred miles an hour. He had just got his eye on you."

"More likely on the gun," said Jean, for we had included a cheap shot-gun among the articles considered indispensable. "Wait until Frank gets after him."

I was greatly flattered by Jean's wholly unwarranted confidence in my marksmanship and eager to justify it at the earliest moment.

"No time like the present," said I, picking up the gun and filling my pocket with cartridges. "Besides, we have a surprise to show you."

So we started out in the gathering darkness, I going first, as became the bearer of the gun; Jean at my heels; Jack and Marjorie a little in the rear. Down the steep edge of the gully we worked, and then along by the marge of the brown

snow-water which rippled happily over beds of bending grass. It was quite dark in the little valley, and I had to hold Jean's hand to guard against the possibility of her slipping into the stream.

At a short distance we came to the spot where the valley broadened out and the little grove of trees had found its place of shelter from Chinook winds in winter and prairie fires in spring and fall. The air was full of the sweet scent of bursting willow buds and balm-o'-Gilead, and as we picked our steps as noiselessly as we could the slightly stirring limbs above us wrought their dark tracery against the blue and starry heaven.

"Oh, Frank! You never told me of this! How wonderful!"

"Wait until you see the pond," I whispered, as one who keeps the best to the last. "We did not select Fourteen and Twenty-two without a reason."

There was no path between the slim, close-growing trunks of poplar and balm, and we had to make progress as best we could. . . . Jack and Marjorie had fallen considerably behind.

Then, suddenly, the still waters of the pond burst upon our view, and at the same moment, as though the very heavens conspired to set the stage to the best advantage, a blood-red moon sent its first pinion of light sweeping down from the north-east and splashing burnt-orange and ochre across the slightly ruffled surface of the pond. We stood for a time as mortals transfixed, watching the great red globe drawing swiftly into the blue above, until its light painted Jean's face and mine. In the moonlight her fine features were wonderful, irresistible

We were brought to earth by a flutter and splashing in the water. Two ducks, sweeping swiftly down out of the darkness, alighted not a dozen yards in front of us, and directly in the line of light. I drew my gun to my shoulder, and even as I did so their murmured grumblings, sibilant almost as the lisp of water on a gravelly shore, came to our ears, and they began to swim slowly about in graceful little circles. There was even a motion about the head of the male, as he brought it close to that of his mate, that was surely nothing short of a caress.

"Don't, Frank, don't; you mustn't!" Jean exclaimed suddenly.

Her arm darted out in front of me, seized the barrel of the gun and drew it swiftly to one side. I had been taking a most deliberate aim, to justify the high opinion already referred to, but at Jean's sudden interference I pressed the trigger, or, as I always claimed, it pulled itself against my finger, and went off. There was a loud report, and the sound of shot harmlessly lashing the water.

"Did you get him—did you get him?" shouted Marjorie and Jack, rushing down upon us.

"No, I didn't get him," I explained. "I didn't even try to get him. I just wanted to see how far the gun would carry."

"I wouldn't let him," said Jean. "It would have been a—just a horrible thing to shoot one of those poor creatures, the very first night we were here! How beautiful they were, and how—how loving!" She said the last word with a bashful, falling inflection that was wonderful to hear.

"It's much more horrible to have no wild duck—ducklet I mean—for to-morrow's dinner," said Jack.

"And those cartridges cost ever so much; what is it?—three or four cents each," Marjorie remonstrated. "Well, let's go back."

We returned to our camp and started to make ready for the night. But Jack, true to his promise, gathered up his blankets, waded the cold stream, and slept under the stars of Twenty-two. We had begun our "period of residence."

CHAPTER VII.

The morning was another gorgeous burst of sunshine. There had been an early dew, and as the sunlight swept along the prairies every blade of grass was hung with diamonds. When I was able to shed my blankets—I have always had a way of getting into intricate entanglements with the bed clothes—I filled my lungs with the fresh oxygen, thumped my chest with my fists, and, looking out over the sparkling prairie, breathed a sort of prayer of possession—"It's mine; it's mine!" Then I found my soap and towel and hustled down to the stream for my morning wash.

The girls, too, were early about. As I came up from the stream I met Jean going down, wearing a blanket, Indian fashion, for lack of a bathrobe. A week on a dusty trail had made the presence of snow water, as deep as one wanted it, a peculiar luxury.

"Gee, but it's good to be alive!" she exclaimed, swinging her arms, to the peril of her costume. "Does one always feel like this on the prairies?"

"Always mildly intoxicated, so Jake says, but those are not his words. That's why Westerners are more optimistic—and more reckless—than Easterners. Always an atmosphere jag under their belts."

"Here's to Jake," she cried. "Have one with me!" as she took a great chestful of fresh air. "See you at breakfast—if I'm sober enough!"

That day, and those that followed, were busy, busy days. The oxen were tired and footsore with their long journey, and we decided to let them rest, but Jack and I took no holiday. I was determined that on the very first day I would plant some crop on my farm, so I started at once to spade up land for a garden. Have you ever turned the first sod on a quarter section with a spade, and then stopped and looked over the vast expanse before you? It made me humble, but not discouraged. There is something almost sacramental in turning over the fresh sod of the prairies—sod which no plow, no human hand, has ever turned before. If you have a mind for serious thinking it brings you very close to your Creator. Perhaps that is why I preferred to dig that first little plot with a spade instead of making use of Buck and Bright on the plow. Buck and Bright were not conducive to piety.

After all, it is remarkable how much prairie sod one can turn over in a day with a spade—sod with no stones nor tough, brushy roots to interrupt progress, but only the gentle scraping of steel against loam and the ripping of little grassy tendons to mark your time as, foot by foot, you throw the trenches of civilization one furrow farther west. By mid-afternoon I had spaded quite a sizable garden plot. Then I broke the clods as best I could and planted a few rows of potatoes. The following day I continued my digging, and that evening, with assistance from Jean and Marjorie, planted onions, carrots, beets, lettuce and radish.

We agreed that by the third day the oxen should be ready for the road again, and Jack was away soon after sunrise of the bright spring morning. He took the trail for the railway station some thirty miles to the south, and the sound of his wagon rumbling along over the soft earth came floating back on the breeze as a sort of accompaniment to the bellicose voice which Jack affected when he was ox-driving. The forenoon was well gone before the slow-moving speck faded out of sight on the skyline.

My next effort was the digging of a cellar. The location of our shack had to be decided upon, and for this I called Marjorie and Jean into council. We agreed that it should be close to one brow of the ravine, and that Jack should build his close to the other, so that each would command an unbroken view of his neighbour. Perhaps even then we had some premonition of the spectre of Loneliness creeping down upon us through the night-mists of the summer or the snow-wraiths of the blizzard, and already we were planning our lines of defence.

"How many rooms will there be?" asked Jean. "Let me see—reception-room, living-room, parlor, dining-room—you must at least have that."

"We shall," I said, "and one door will lead into them all. A room is anything you call it. We can change the name as we change the purpose. One moment it is kitchen, the next, living-room, and so on."

"Draw a plan of it," said Marjorie, turning up the planed side of a board. So I sat down and drew a plan, while the girls watched over my shoulders with as much intentness as though I were an architect designing a palace.

"The house will be one storey," I explained, "and long, and narrow, because that is the simplest as well as the cheapest way to build it, and we are to be our own carpenters. The walls will be of shiplap, covered with matched siding, with tarpaper between. The roof will be of two thicknesses of boards, bent to a gentle oval over a stout ridge-pole, and again with tarpaper between. You have no idea how much the West owes to tarpaper. Wherever the new settler goes, goes tarpaper. I would almost say," I continued, warming up to my subject, "that if a flag is ever needed for these western prairies it should be a banner of tarpaper, nailed between two laths. 'O say, does the tarpaper banner still wave?'—you see, it has possibilities."

"But isn't it awfully smelly stuff?" said Jean, who had a strain of delicacy in her that at times conflicted with her surroundings.

"Ah, that is one of its chief virtues. You may not know yet, but you will learn—at least, so Jake assured me—that population is not nearly so scarce on the prairies as it seems. He says that the inmates of one of these little bachelor shacks in many cases number literally millions. Millions. Well—they don't like tarpaper. Blessed be tarpaper!"

"The house is to be fourteen feet wide, so that sixteen-foot boards will bend just the right length for the roof. The main room—which is to be all the rooms you mentioned, Jean, and the kitchen as well—will be in the centre of the building. It will be fourteen feet square—like that. At the south end of the building, where the sun will shine in spring and flowers will grow up the wall, will be a room eight by fourteen—Marjorie's. At the north end, where the winter winds will hit us first, will be a room eight by fourteen—Frank's. That's all."

"And the windows?" said Marjorie.

"A window in the south for you, a window in the north for me, a window in the west for the living-room, and a door in the east for us all."

"How simple—and delightful!" Jean trilled. "And is Jack's house—our house—to be the same?"

"That is the intention. Of course, these plans are subject to approval or rejection by the feminine vote, but Jack and I talked it over with Jake, and we figured this was the best we could afford, and the most we could get for the money."

Marjorie seemed to be studying deeply. "Then your window will look across the valley into Jean's," she said suddenly.

Now this was something which I had planned with, it seemed to me, consummate cleverness. I had thought that on dark nights and stormy nights, when the wind was whining dolefully about the gables, my light in my window might be—well, Jean might like to see it there. Still, it was surely right that Jean should occupy a south room, the same as Marjorie. I was provoked at Marjorie for—for finding me out.

"Why, Marjorie, I am surprised," I began, as severely as I could, but Jean cut me short. "I move the adoption of the plan," she said.

So I scratched the outline of the shack in the sod with my shovel and began digging a cellar in the centre of the little plot. For a depth of nearly two feet I dug through a brownish-black loam that turned easily and threw clean from the shovel. Then I struck a sticky, yellow clay, and the going was much slower. But by the time we heard Jack's hoarse voice and his tired oxen clicking their hoofs up the trail on the evening of the second day I had succeeded in making a hole which we agreed to call a cellar.

The wagon was well loaded with boards and other building material, including the inevitable tarpaper, and the next morning we were about to start construction work when Jack dropped an armful of two-by-fours with a sudden exclamation.

"I clean forgot," he said. "They told me in town yesterday that it was Saturday. This must be Sunday."

As you know, Jack and I had been brought up with good old Ontario ideas of the sanctity of the Sabbath. It was not surprising that he should drop his burden where he stood, and that his face, when he turned to me, had written on it something almost akin to dismay.

"Must be," I said, laying down my shovel.

For some moments we stood trying to drink in the significance of the fact, and realizing for the first time what an

artificial thing the calendar is. This morning was exactly like the other mornings of the week; a burst of golden dawn, a sea of diamond dew-drops, a rollicking breeze out of the West, a wisp of feathery cloudland far above. There was nothing about it to suggest that it was more holy than its neighbors.

"Fact is," said I at last, "I begin to think we must have missed one Sunday altogether."

"I'm afraid we did," Jack admitted, contritely. "Let's tell the girls."

Accordingly we bore to them the great information. All work was discontinued, and we lounged about, trying to feel good. It was one of the longest days I can remember.

Next day we set about our building in earnest. I wish I dared weary you with the detail of the operations; the twanging of the saw in the new boards, the thwack of the hammer on the bright nails, the smell of cedar sawdust and of tarpaper, the sheer joy of creation as we saw our home rise tier by tier from the bare bosom of the plain. There were no Union hours with us. We worked from early morning until after sunset, and laid down our tools at last with affectionate reluctance. We were stiff and sore in every joint and muscle; our hands were caloused and our finger nails were battered with misdirected energy, but our hearts were with the gods. I relate only absolute truth in saying that when our shack was finished we moved into it with a sense of accomplishment such as perhaps no king ever knew amid the luxury of his palaces.

As soon as our first building was finished we started a similar one for Jack and Jean. Then we built a little stable down in the gully for the oxen, the cow, the pig, and the hens; we improved the crossing of the stream; we dug a well; we plowed a small area on each farm and planted it to oats, and then we went on plowing for next season's crop; we bought a mowing-machine and rake—on credit—and cut an ample supply of wild prairie hay for our winter needs. We had decided that, as fall came on, Jack and I, with the yoke of oxen, should make a pilgrimage into the more settled districts with a view to getting work with some farmer, and so replenishing our resources.

It was a hot day in the middle of July when, up the trail from the south, a speck grew out of the distance. Traffic did not often come our way, and Jack and I both stopped work in the field to study its approach and to conjecture as to who or what it might be. The light on the prairies on a hot day has a way of shimmering that sometimes renders the outline of an object, or even its color, vague, although its location may be discerned for many miles. Even as we watched a curious optical illusion occurred; the strange object left the ground and seemed to hang motionless, suspended slightly over the horizon.

We glanced over to the shacks and saw both Marjorie and Jean standing with shaded eyes studying the phenomenon. Then, as we watched, the figure took the form of a horse and rider of heroic size charging down upon us literally out of the heavens. As it approached the mirage lost its illusion and horse and rider came back to earth. By this time we were sure that the glint of color which had seemed to dance vaguely about the figure had a basis in fact; there was no longer a doubt that an atom of scarlet was approaching along the trail.

Leaving the oxen to their midday meditations we walked over to my shack, where Jean had already joined Marjorie. It could now be seen that the figure was approaching at a rapid gait, and its outline, no longer blurred by the shimmering of the mirage, stood out sharp and clean against the distance. It was a Mounted Policeman.

As he drew up beside us I had a sense of being in the presence of physical perfection. His horse, although wet over the flanks, showed little sign of fatigue; the dust of travel clung to the rider's sunburned face, but the smartness of his bearing and uniform was unimpaired. He saluted as he brought his horse to a standstill; then sprang lightly to the ground.

"I see I am right," he said, addressing Marjorie and Jean. "Won't you introduce me?"

Marjorie was the first to act, although I suspected, even then, that he had spoken more particularly to Jean. "My brother, Frank," she said, "and Jean's brother, Jack. This is Mr. Brook."

We shook hands cordially, and Jean asked our visitor if he had had dinner. "I have not," he confessed, "but please don't go to any trouble." But the girls were already in the house, making preparations.

"There's a stream around here, if my maps are right," the policeman continued, speaking to us, "and both Dick and I could do with water."

We led him down to the stream, and to the well, and although I was disposed to be prejudiced against this strapping young fellow who seemed to take more than a casual interest in Jean, I lost much of that prejudice through a little incident that happened when we reached the water. Although Brook was undoubtedly suffering from thirst he removed his horse's bit, so that he could drink in comfort, before he accepted the proffered cup of water which Jack brought him from the well. Jack and I spoke of it afterward and agreed that a chap who did that sort of thing was a good bit of a man.

After a hearty drink Brook took off his hat and tunic, produced towel, soap, comb and brush, and cleaned up even more thoroughly than seemed necessary. As I watched him parting his hair by the reflection in the water I realized that Brook had not forgotten what so many of we pioneers often did forget—the value of personal appearance. While we walked up the bank together I admitted to myself that although I was as good a man as he was, I didn't look it.

The meal which the girls had prepared loosened all our tongues, and before it was over we were chatting merrily. Brook had the latest gossip from Regina, and interesting news about himself. At last he had escaped from barracks, temporarily, at any rate. He was detailed to two months' relief duty at a point farther west; he promised himself another meal at our board on his way back, a prospect which Jean and Marjorie and Jack received with much satisfaction, and I trust I showed no smallness about it.

The policeman rested with us in the shade of the house for an hour or two, chatting breezily, and smoking numerous cigarettes. Neither Jack nor I smoked at that time, but I think it must be recorded that Brook introduced us, somewhat hesitatingly, to the alleged charms of Lady Nicotine. In short, we smoked rather less than half a cigarette each. It is one of the complexities of woman's nature which I did not understand then, and do not understand yet, that Jean, who openly admired this cigarette-smoking policeman, scaled me down many feet in her estimation because I surrendered to a single inch of temptation.

At length Brook insisted that he must be on his way, but before going he laid a dollar bill on the table in payment for his meal. We objected most strenuously to accepting money for our hospitality, but as he pointed out that it was the Government that footed the bill, we allowed ourselves to be persuaded. Governments, like railways, are legitimate prey. Also, from somewhere, the policeman produced a small box of candy, which he presented impartially to Marjorie and Jean. But most important, in-so-far as this story is concerned, was a bundle of letters. They were tied together with a stout string, with only the backs of the envelopes exposed, and on them was written in a bold hand the single word "Spoof".

"They're for a young Englishman who is to be a neighbour of yours," Brook explained. "He left word at the Regina post-office, asking to have his mail sent out if there was any chance. It seems he had some local fame under the name of Spoof, and the clerk in the post-office readdressed his letters that way. That's discipline for you! My word, what they wouldn't do to a man in the Force——"

"I know him," I broke in; "at least I have heard of him. Jake, our land guide told us about him. Where does he settle?"

"North-west quarter of Two," said the policeman. "Two miles due south of you, as the crow flies, or would fly, if he had occasion to. Spoof isn't there yet—I came by the quarter this morning. I suppose he's travelling by ox-team and will arrive some time later in the season. You'll see his sign up on Two when he gets here, and perhaps one of you wouldn't mind dropping in on him with this mail, if he doesn't call on you within a few days. He's English, and he may wait for an introduction."

We shook hands with the policeman and parted with him, and the girls stood watching the scarlet figure as it faded to a speck in the distance.

"Isn't he wonderful, Frank?" said Jean, turning to me with an enthusiasm dancing in her eyes which, under any other circumstances, it would have been good to see. "Don't you think that he—that all of the Mounted Police—are very wonderful?"

"All of the Mounted Police are wonderful," I agreed, catching at the impersonal noun. "They are a wonderful Force. They have a tradition which has made them what they are. It is '*Get your man!*'"

"In Regina they say it is '*Get your woman!*'" interrupted Marjorie, who had a way of bursting in at inopportune moments. "I think, brother mine, you'd better keep an eye cocked."

"For the Englishman on Two? That will be Jack's look-out," Jean retorted. "Well, here's a welcome to a neighbour—any neighbour. I must pick an acquaintance with Spoof."

The opportunity was not long delayed. Two mornings later we saw the white gleam of a tent on section Two. We quit work early that afternoon, hitched the oxen to the wagon, and went down *en masse* to call on Spoof. He saw us when we were yet afar off, and, when it was evident we were headed for his tent, he came striding out to meet us. He was tall and slim and sunburned; he wore leggings and corduroy trousers and a belt, and he took off his hat when he saw the girls.

"My first callers," he said, in his clear, English voice. "This is jolly decent of you. Won't you get down, ladies, and visit my farm—this is it, all around here—while we unhitch the bullocks and turn them to grass? I suspect you are my neighbours from Fourteen?"

"Fourteen and Twenty-two," said I, acting as spokesman, and introducing our little party. "We have heard of you, but only as Spoof."

"Spoof is good enough. In fact, I think it is rather a ripping name, don't you? And I know enough already about the West to know that a catchy nick-name, once applied, sticks. So Spoof I am, to everybody, except the dear folks at home, who, of course, could never understand. When I wrote the Governor and said the people here called me Spoof he answered, 'Such insolence! I'd have the law on them! Remember you are still an Englishman!' Poor old Governor!"

"Here are some letters, Mr. Spoof," said Jean, extending the little bundle. "Mr. Brook, the policeman, left them as he rode by a few days ago."

"Good old post office!" Spoof exclaimed. "Wonderful how they chase a beggar down, isn't it? They even know me by my Canadian name. Good old P.O."

Spoof made us come into his tent. The furnishings were not elaborate, but they had a little air of something that seemed to be missing in ours. There was a tin trunk, which had been sat on until it had a great depression in the top, and a leather trunk, generously plastered with labels. There was a great box, which he used as a table, and dishes of inappropriately delicate china. There was a folding camp cot with steamer rugs. Quite a handsome shaving set was strapped to a wall of the tent, and a great cartridge belt with a prodigious revolver hung from a tent pole, while a rifle leaned against it. Spoof evidently meant to sell his life dearly, if there should be any demand for it. Three or four English magazines lay about, and a tobacco jar with pipes stood in the centre of the table. But what caught Jean's eyes were the pictures on the walls. Spoof's tent was up less than a day, and there were pictures on the walls!

"This is my diggings," our host was saying. "A little crowded inside, but plenty of room outside. The law of compensation, you know. Have to do for the present. Beastly expensive business farming. We'll have some tea presently, if there's any spirit left in the spirit lamp. Sorry I can't offer you anything better." So he rattled on and made us feel very much at home, even while I found rising in my heart some yearning of sympathy for him. I recalled the incident about Jake and Spoof's sixty pounds, and I supposed that was but one of many similar experiences in the life of this young seed of Empire. That was the price of being a "greenhorn". When I spoke a little while ago of railways and governments being fair prey, I should have added greenhorns.

"It's the only way to treat 'em," Jake defended the custom of the country when I took him to task about it afterwards. "They're jus' like bronchoes—not worth a dang until they're broke. Then they'll work."

Evidently Spoof had come to the point where he was willing to work, but certainly not to allow work to interfere with his social engagements. Fragments of harness about the door of the tent indicated the line of his effort just before we had come up, but now he was pouring tea and helping sugar and biscuits and cheese with a grace of manner which made Jack and me and even Marjorie a little ill at ease. We had an uncomfortable feeling of being out of our class, as one does when he listens to a conversation in which his limitations will allow him to take little part. Only Jean seemed to wholly enjoy it; she was talking with him about prairie cloudscapes, and seemed to have quite forgotten herself in her enthusiasm. As I listened I marvelled how wonderful Jean's voice was; it was not harsh or guttural or uneven, but seemed to flow in a liquid, limpid stream, tinkling and rippling and running in happy little rills. It must have sounded very sweet to English ears.

Spoof, too, seemed to enjoy the conversation, and to react to the music of Jean's voice. He was too fine mannered to monopolize the stage with any one of his guests; occasionally he threw conversational feelers at Marjorie, and Jack, and

me, but we were slow in the up-take, and before we quite knew what he was talking about the dialogue had again passed back to Jean. She seemed to have a grasp of things, of delicate, thoughtful, artistic things, far beyond any gift of ours. I was astonished and a bit terrified by the gulf which I now found spreading between her plane and mine. I had not been conscious of that gulf before. I had not failed to appreciate Jean's charms, but never before had I realized how high her level was above mine; never before had I felt myself unworthy of her; never had I known the lurking fear that some one, of finer clay than I, might claim her in the end.

The sun was setting when our little caravan started homeward, casting its mammoth shadows across the soft, warm prairies, and bearing Spoof's promise to return our visit at the earliest opportunity.

CHAPTER VIII.

Spoof was as good as his word. The following Sunday we saw his ox-team as a slowly-growing speck on section Eleven, and a mile away we heard remarks to the "bally bullocks" which, presumably, were intended to be confidential.

"I just brought the bullocks for exercise," he explained, when he drew up before our shack. "I could have walked much easier, and much quicker, but they keep my arms and voice in form."

Even while Spoof was speaking, his oxen, attracted by the smell of fresh hay at our stable, moved down over the bank of the gully and upset the wagon *en route*. We disentangled them with some difficulty.

"I begin to lose sympathy with them; I really do," said Spoof, when we found that the reach of his wagon was broken. "Now I shall have to bind this bally thing together. Yesterday they balked in the hay meadow; in the hay meadow, mind you, where, if at all, an ox should be in an amiable mood. I argued with them for an hour, without effect, and then I went home and read a magazine. It's an ill wind, you know. They followed me about supper time."

"I'll tell you how to fix them," Jack remarked. "Next time they balk——"

"But if I fix them they won't be able to move at all," Spoof protested. "'Fix' is to make fast, to render immovable, and they're too much that way already."

"No doubt that is what fix means in England," Jack admitted, "but in Canada, to 'fix' a balky ox means, when everything else fails, to put an armful of hay under him and set fire to it. It does the trick."

"By Jove, that's a ripping idea! Now why couldn't I think of that? I suppose because I'm a greenhorn. I shall try it at the first opportunity."

Spoof retrieved a bundle of papers which had fallen out of his wagon box, and together we went up to the house. The girls were waiting in the shade at the eastern side of the shack; in their Sunday dresses of flimsy stuff appropriate to the hot weather they looked very sweet and charming.

"Ah, here are the ladies," said Spoof, and in his manner there was a touch of gallantry that in some way seemed foreign to either Jack or me. "Real prairie roses, and no mistake," as he took their hands in his. "It's jolly decent to ask a stranger over. All this out-of-doors; dawns, sunsets, sky, distance—all very fine, but it isn't good to be too much alone with it. Rather overwhelms one, don't you think?"

"I have felt that," said Jean, while Marjorie was fumbling for words. "It's too grand; it oppresses one. It's—it's all soul; no body."

"That's it—that's it!" Spoof agreed. "All soul—no body. I shall write that to the Governor. The Governor, dear old chap, thinks this country is rather a bit off the map. I have promised to shoot him a polar bear for Christmas, and he's quite looking forward to it. He writes to know if I find the native labor satisfactory, and can my man mix a decent whisky and soda. I must set his mind at rest. I let him think I run quite an establishment, you understand; he sends a cheque now and again, which, of course, bears a relationship to the position I am supposed to occupy in local society."

"Doesn't your conscience trouble you?" Marjorie queried, the conversation having swung into her orbit.

"Not at all. I am doing the Governor a kindness. He spends rather too much money on whisky and soda—particularly the former—so I am merely getting him interested in another kind of extravagance. A Younger Son is a very successful form of extravagance, don't you think? What is it Kipling says—'By the bitter road the Younger Son must tread,' or something like that? So why shouldn't the Governor sweeten the bitter road a little, and drink less whisky to his soda?"

While we were busy thinking of some appropriate remark Spoof remembered his bundle of papers.

"I ventured to bring these over," he said, tendering them to Jean. "Just some old copies of *The Illustrated London News* and *The Graphic*. There are some sketches by an artist showing his conception of homestead life. I rather suspect the Governor has let him read my letters."

Presently the conversation turned to agricultural topics, and we were more at ease.

"My plowing," Spoof explained, "has gone better since I discarded my compass. The bullocks never took kindly to the compass. No doubt it was a foolish notion of mine that a furrow should run either east and west or north and south, seeing that the whole farm has to be plowed anyway. I now let them veer and tack as they please, and we are making considerable headway."

"Any crop in?"

"Not this year. A chap in Regina advised me to plant a sack of rolled oats and raise my own porridge, but, thank Heaven, I'm not Scotch. No reflection on the Scotch," he added hurriedly, noting a warning flash in Marjorie's eyes. "They are a very wonderful people. They eat oatmeal, and thrive on it. A very wonderful people."

"No garden either?"

"Only a few sunflowers. They should be up presently."

"Sunflowers? Why sunflowers?"

"A chap in Regina—Jake, the land guide—you know Jake, don't you?—he told me to be sure and plant some sunflowers. They are invaluable in winter. They stand up through the snow, and the sunlight beating on their bright, yellow faces enables a settler to locate his shack when otherwise the country is all a white blanket of snow. Jake assured me that many a settler had been frozen to death through neglect of this simple precaution."

"It's simple, all right," Jack agreed. "Our friend Jake seems to be a good adviser. Did he give you any other hints?"

"Lots of them, but I'm afraid he's a bit of a spoof. Told me to catch four gophers and tie them by the hind legs to the four corners of my farm, and their squealing would warn all the other gophers off. I tried it but it didn't make a bit of difference. In fact, gophers seem to be about all I'm raising this year—gophers and sunflowers. His wild duck trap was no success, either. Jake showed me how to make a trap for wild ducks, and told me to put some buffalo bones in it and I would catch all the ducks I could eat. Said the ducks had to have the bone material for shells for the eggs, and would go anywhere to get it. I set two traps, but so far I haven't caught a duck."

"But did you put any tiger lilies in with the bones?" Jack inquired, with a face that had its struggles to keep straight.

"Tiger lilies? No, he didn't mention that."

"Oh, that's a serious oversight," said Jack, who was rapidly taking on the ways of the West. "Tiger lilies are the main part of the trap. You see, the ducks cannot see the bones at night, and so they are guided by the scent of the tiger lilies, which always grow around deposits of buffalo bones. Just gather a few fresh lilies every evening and lay them on the bones and you'll be surprised at the result."

In following this discussion I had not been observing Jean, or I should have seen the gathering storm in time, perhaps, to have averted it. Now she sprang in front of us like a mother bird at bay. If Jean, passive, was beautiful, Jean, aroused, was magnificent. I sensed *that* even while swept off my feet by the blast of her indignation.

"It's a lie!" she exclaimed. "It's all a pack of lies! They're—they're 'spoofing' you, as you call it." She turned her withering glance particularly upon her brother, but I did not quite escape it. "They take advantage of your strangeness to the country to make you appear foolish—they, who don't know Rembrandt from Mozart, or—or—" "

Jean paused in her tirade, stuck for a figure that would express her contempt for us. It was the first time I had seen Jean in the grip of a righteous and belligerent indignation. She had revealed a new side of her nature that was wonderful, adorable; perhaps a bit dangerous. The poignancy of her beauty was not lessened by the knowledge that I had fallen a number of degrees in her estimation, and that Spoof had doubtless ascended a proportionate distance.

Spoof was the first to get his balance. "Why, why—that's all right," he exclaimed. "Quite all right. A ripping good joke, I call it. I must work that on the Governor when he comes to visit me. I shall have him pulling tiger lilies for my duck traps,—see if I don't!"

"That will be when he comes for the polar bear you have promised him," said Jack, slyly. "You see, Jean, Spoof is a bit

of a spoof himself."

"I don't care if he is!" Jean flared back. "It isn't fair to—to—" Jean was very close to tears. "You too, Frank!" she exclaimed, suddenly turning her wrath upon me, "You sat there like a mummy never saying a word—"

"Well, that should let me out, I had nothing to do with—"

"Yes, you did! I saw you snicker! You're as bad as Jack, and you would have said the same things, if you had been bright enough."

That was a body blow, but Spoof came to my rescue.

"Oh, I say!" he exclaimed, "can't we have some tea? Beastly dry business, homesteading; no afternoon tea. I must speak to my man about that. He's the same man as mixes my whisky and sodas, according to the Governor's idea of it," Spoof explained.

The suggestion of tea confronted the girls with work, which, in proper doses, is the universal restorer of good humor. They went inside, and when in a short while they brought out tea and sandwiches the storm had swept by, with only a dash of color in Jean's cheeks, like a rainbow in an afternoon sky, to mark its passing.

"Do you know," said Spoof, when the girls had cleared up the tea things and were out of hearing, "the thing of which I stand most in need at the present moment—that thing which is so essentially English, and from which I have been divorced for more days than I care to number—that thing for which I would gladly give half of my kingdom, meaning the north-west quarter of section Two? No? Observe the blushes beneath my sunburned cuticle as I admit that for weeks I have not had a bath. For weeks, literally. If my poor Governor could know that, not even the hide of a polar bear would reconcile him to leaving me to live the life of a savage."

"We can soon fix that—I mean, we can furnish the wherewithal," said I, "and I will expect the deed of eighty acres in return." So we led Spoof down to the pond, which the sun, now well over to the west, was burnishing with hues of burnt-orange and amber. Along its grassy shore on the northern side a score or more wild ducks were feeding, some of them tail-tilted in the air as they grubbed the roots in the shallow water. Their only notice of us was to move a little closer to the bank, while two or three worried mothers gathered their broods in little fluffy phalanxes behind them.

"My word, my word!" said Spoof. "Why didn't Jake tell me about this? I will have that land guide's gizzard for this omission! . . . And how tame they are!"

"No shooting yet," I explained. "It isn't fair to the youngsters; but there's a great day coming. But the water is fine, and deep enough toward the middle."

"My word, if only I had a bathing suit! I say, do you think there would be any great danger—any danger at all, that is—of an interruption?"

"Not a bit. We have that all organized," and I showed him a red handkerchief tied to a stick. "When the pond is in use we fly this banner on the bank of the gully, and we're as safe as Sunday. The girls usually have their plunge in the middle of the afternoon, for that matter, and leave us undivided possession in the evening."

Spoof was already half undressed. "My word, and do the young ladies swim?"

"Jean is the best swimmer I ever knew," I confessed, modestly. "We lived beside a river at home, and she had a way of bagging all the prizes at our swimming races."

"She bagged bigger game than that," Jack put in. "She stored up a lot of trouble for herself and the rest of us by pulling our worthy Frank out of the mill-pond one day, after the bubbles had begun to come." So then I had to tell Spoof about that incident. But I avoided reference to the pledge that had followed it.

"I'm afraid I shall be over here more often than you'll welcome me," said Spoof, as he revelled in the water. "You know, of course, the difference between a bawth and a bath?"

"Don't know that I do," Jack admitted, spouting water after a plunge.

"A bawth," Spoof explained, "is what an Englishman has every morning, and a bath is what a Canadian has Saturday nights."

After that we held Spoof under the water while I counted ten, counting very slowly.

When we had had our swim and dried ourselves on the sand we went back up to the house. The shadows were now falling, long and narrow, to the eastward, and the prairie lay hushed and silent in that deep and peaceful calm which marks the summer evening an hour or two before sundown. The grass had taken on its peculiar evening shade of green; the sunlight was yellow and amber, the stillness so universal and complete that all nature seemed to await in reverence the vesper hour. All but an irrepressible meadow-lark which, from a fence post nearby, thrust its limpid challenge at us as we came up to the house.

After supper Spoof sat and chatted until it was time to light the lamp. Jean set it on the table, and as its yellow glow fell across his face I realized for the first time that Spoof was not a boy, as were Jack and I. There were lines in the cheeks and about the eyes which, magnified by the shadows under the lamplight, bore evidence that Spoof had known more of this world's cares than was hinted by his usual light-hearted conversation.

Presently he was talking of England; easing, perhaps the homesickness in his heart by calling up scenes of leafy lanes and misty sun-shot landscapes linking deeply into his life. He had tales of London as well; tales of art treasures and music and theatres all alike with life and beauty; tales of grave-stones marking the great of a nation with a history reaching back into the early obscurity of Western civilization. Something about the pride he showed in the great deeds of the past seemed to strike us strangely—we of a country whose history was still so much in the future and whose greatest deeds were still to be done.

"I tell you," said Spoof, "it is a wonderful thing to have a share in the foundation work of a nation that is going on to-day on these prairies. It's a wonderful thing to lay corner-stones of empire. But it's a dangerous thing to have no past to steady you, to humble you, to inspire. It's just as dangerous to live too much in the future, as we do here, as to live too much in the past, as perhaps we do in England."

"That's why we need some of you people from the Old Land to mix with ours," said Jean. "We need something to link our future with our past—to give us balance, poise."

"Poise is the word, I think," Spoof commented. "New countries have energy, ambition, enthusiasm, courage, optimism—all wonderful qualities—but they are likely to need poise. That is something we are perhaps overstocked with at home. My blessed countrymen are so well poised that I lose patience with them now and again because they don't lose patience with other people."

"Still," said Jack, "it's a great thing to be adaptable. What other people would be so ready to adjust themselves to the ways of the country, to set out their duck traps——"

"Oh, don't let us have any more of that!" Marjorie exclaimed. "I've been all afternoon nursing Jean back into good humor, and I'm not too sure of her yet. Let's change the subject. Do you sing, Mr. Spoof?"

"Only at great distances from civilization,—my bullocks could say a word or two about my musical voice if they were so disposed. But surely you or Miss Hall——"

"Jean sings and plays, if we have anything to play on," Marjorie declared, "But we haven't added a piano yet to our equipment. I suppose we shall have to buy a binder and horses and perhaps a threshing mill before we have any money for musical instruments."

"And a house," I added. "I'd like to see you keep a piano in tune in a cage like this."

"You should have a banjo," said Spoof. "By Jove, just the thing! I've a banjo tucked away somewhere in my belongings. Something I forgot to pawn at Regina. I'll bring it over and give you lessons, if you'll let me."

"I should be delighted," said Jean, and her voice was quite unnecessarily low and sweet.

There was a late twilight glow in the northern sky and the smell of dew on the prairie grass filled the air when Spoof decided it was time to go home. We helped him bind up his broken reach and hitch the "bally bullocks" to the wagon and

watched him disappear into the darkness. Long after he was lost to sight the rumble of his wagon and the voice of his exhortation could be heard welling up out of the distance.

"A fine chap," said Jack, as we parted for the night. "I am glad we are to have him for a neighbour."

"Yes," said I. But my voice had no ring of enthusiasm.

CHAPTER IX.

The day after Spoof's visit I was plowing with the oxen, followed by an Indian file of expectant blackbirds trailing along in my fresh-turned furrow, when I suddenly became aware of Jack running toward me. He pointed in the direction of Spoof's homestead, and I turned my face to the south. A pillar of creamish-blue smoke rose like a sacrificial column from section Two; rose until it thinned and flattened out against the still, warm, summer heaven.

"What do you make of it?" said Jack, wiping the perspiration from his forehead with the sleeve of his shirt.

I was seized with a sudden and far-fetched sense of humor. "Spoof has taken your advice about the tiger lilies, and is roasting a wild duck," I suggested.

"At any rate," Jack retorted, "he has a fire on his hands, and he's just as likely to scatter it as to put it out. Lucky for him the grass is still green, and there's hardly a puff of wind. Shall we hoof it, or ride the 'bullocks'?"

"Ride them, and save our breath for fire-fighting," I said, with unusual wisdom, as I began to pull the harness from the oxen.

Buck and Bright were by this time fairly accustomed to strange creatures like Jack and me perched on their broad backs, with our legs hooped about their big, flat ribs, and, if the truth must be told, even Jean and Marjorie had made use of them for locomotion in a similar way. At first the oxen had rewarded their riders with a wholly unprecedented burst of speed, but the novelty had soon worn off, and as we now swung ourselves upon them they responded to our urgings with the most unconcerned deliberation. We headed them across the prairie in the direction of section Two, inducing such speed as we could by means of language and the vigorous application of our boot heels.

Soon the fire could be discerned on that part of Spoof's farm where he was engaged in putting up hay. The column of smoke was thinning out; fading into the blue blurr of infinitude; it looked as though the excitement would be quite over before we could arrive. However, we were now bent upon paying Spoof a neighbourly call in any case, and when at last our oxen lumbered up we found him gazing somewhat ruefully upon a heap of smouldering embers. The tires of his wagon, grey-red with heat, peered like coiled serpents from under a blanket of ashes.

"What's the matter, Spoof?" we hailed him. "A cigarette butt?"

"No. I was *fixing* the bullocks, and I've *fixed* the wagon . . . I forgot the tiger lilies."

There was no anger in Spoof's voice, but a sort of sadness that made us a little ashamed of our sport with him the day before.

"Tell us how it happened," we said, dismounting and turning our oxen to feed along with his at a nearby heap of hay.
"We're sorry."

Spoof was himself again. "Of course you are," he rejoined, laughing. "All my fault. How shall I report this to the Governor? I know; I shall say I drove over a Canadian double-orbed firefly—one must throw in a touch of detail, for its realistic effect—and the spark ignited the hay. By the way, how much does a bally wagon cost? A hundred pounds?"

"Oh, no. You can get a good one for a hundred dollars or less, and perhaps a second-hand——"

"But I mean for the purposes of a communication to the Governor?"

We agreed that for such a purpose the value of a wagon was one hundred pounds.

"It happened like this," Spoof explained. "The bullocks decided to have their afternoon siesta as usual, and were unresponsive to all my blandishments. Then I remembered your simple remedy—the remedy which you said would be sure to fix them. So I brought an armful of hay, spread it impartially under both of them, set fire to it, and stood back for results.

"The process was a very interesting one. At first they seemed to think it was flies, but when their kicking and switching proved ineffectual they gently moved forward just far enough to bring the wagon, half full of hay, over the fire. Then they resumed their slumbers.

"Well, I paused a moment, wondering whether I should let nature take its course and have grilled steak for supper, but I decided that I was in more need of steak on the hoof than in the platter. So I crowded in and unhitched them, and got my eye-brows singed for my pains."

"Good boy, Spoof!" said I. "You couldn't have done more than that." Whereupon Spoof turned on me a look of gratitude out of all proportion to my remark.

"It's good of you to say that. I felt that I had been rather an ass, don't you know? I was quite sure you would see the smoke. . . . Well,—I say, let's go in and have some tea."

So we had tea, with bread and jam, and afterwards Spoof insisted upon reading paragraphs from *Punch*.

"It's a different kind of humor, don't you know?" he would say, when we failed to laugh at the right moment; "nothing to do with buffalo bones or tiger lilies, or gophers tied by their hind legs to the corner stakes of one's farm. But then, we English are a peculiar people; we can have a joke without making a bonfire over it."

"That is just what you, personally, didn't do," Jack reminded him. "It was your bonfire, not ours."

It was almost sundown when Spoof for the seventh time absolved us from all blame in the matter, and we started on our trek homeward across the green prairie. Jack offered to go to town the next day and negotiate a deal for a new wagon, but Spoof would not hear of it. He himself would go, and no other.

"I have to pick up some new language, anyway," he insisted. "The bullocks are growing very tired of the monotony of my remarks."

Spoof evidently left the next morning, for when Jack and I went over to Two about the middle of the forenoon the place was deserted. We set to work in his hay field, and by Wednesday night we had harvested more hay than Spoof would have put up in a week. That was our atonement.

Affairs now began to move with some rapidity in our little settlement. Until now we had had the world, as far as the eye could carry, to ourselves, but Spoof proved only the advance guard of a stream of neighbours which, from its source in a dozen different springs of humanity, was to pour in upon us during the next few months. Wednesday night we came back from Spoof's, as we had a little shyness about being overtaken in our good works, and the next morning, while I was gulping great draughts of ozone in front of the shack before breakfast, Marjorie called over my shoulder,

"What's that, away to the east, Frank?"

Sure enough, there was a little white pyramid outlined against the horizon; another tent pitched against the front trenches of civilization.

"Neighbours, Marjorie; neighbours!" I said. "We're getting to be quite a community. Do you ever think of the day when all this wilderness of prairie will be plowed, every foot of it; all bearing something for the world's needs, with prosperous farm houses at every corner, schools, churches——"

"I smell the porridge!" Marjorie exclaimed, rushing into the shack. She had a way of cutting off my rhapsodies like that.

Jack had seen the tent, too, and he and Jean came over at noon to discuss it. We decided to knock off work early that evening and all drive over to make the acquaintance of the new-comers.

We found that the tent was pitched on Eighteen, in the next township to the east. As we came up we were greeted by a fine collie dog, who seemed to be suffering from the conflicting emotions of his natural good humor and a sense that we had no business on Eighteen. His rush upon us with great barking and show of ferocity ended in much amiable tail-wagging. Evidently we measured up to his requirements, which we took to be no mean compliment.

A team of ponies were tethered on the prairie not far away, and a democrat stood beside the tent, with some of its burden still to be unloaded. A woman of slender build and rather striking beauty stood at the door. There was surprise, and, as I thought, a suggestion of fear in her eyes. More remarkable was the sudden and unmistakable relief which sprang into her expression when she had seen us clearly.

I am not a detective, even of the amateur kind, but I found myself instantly gripped by a conclusion. "The woman is

afraid," I said to myself, "and yet she is no coward, she has no fear of strangers, but she is afraid of someone—afraid of someone she knows. She was relieved when she saw we were strangers." The thought was one which was to recur to me from many angles during the next few months.

She seemed to hesitate about greeting us, and Jean, always the quick-witted one of our quartette, was the first to break a rather stupid silence. She sprang lightly from the wagon and went forward with arms outstretched.

"We are your neighbours, from Fourteen and Twenty-two," she explained. "We saw your tent, and thought we would welcome you to prairie-land."

"That is good of you," said a well modulated English voice, but some way the voice seemed to break just there, and the lips of the new-comer went all a-tremble. The next we knew she and Jean had their arms about each other. . . .

"Oh, how horribly stupid of me!" the stranger exclaimed, in a moment or two, disengaging herself and dabbing her eyes with a little lump of handkerchief. "One gets a bit—a bit lonely, in spite of everything. You will think I am rather a bad pioneer. My name is Mrs. Alton, and I'm so glad you came, Miss—Miss——"

Jean introduced herself and the others of our party, and then we clambered down out of the wagon.

"Gerald and I have been very much alone," Mrs. Alton explained. "Gerald doesn't seem to mind it a bit—rather glories in it, I think. Already he has made some great explorations, but always under Sandy's watchful eye. Sandy is a great comfort. Aren't you, sir?"

She turned to the dog, who sedately held up one paw in acknowledgment of her remark.

"Gerald, I should have told you, has just turned three. I am a widow," Mrs. Alton rattled on, as though not wishing to stress the point—"and Gerald and I have our way to make in the world. He is tired now, and asleep after a great day's roaming, but I shall wake him before you go."

"Oh, please don't!" Jean entreated. "Let us see him as he sleeps," and without waiting for an invitation she gently made her way into the little tent.

"Don't you think me clever?" Mrs. Alton asked, when we had at last discovered it.

It consisted of a trunk, with the lid turned back, and about half the contents removed. In this she had laid a little mattress, and on the mattress slept a beautiful boy, his face still ruddy from his wrestle with the prairie winds; his lips cherry red and slightly parted; his little arms thrown jauntily above his head. Jean leaned and touched the breathing lips with hers, and so did Marjorie, and a little later I saw tears on the cheeks of both. It was then I remembered that these girls had not seen a child since we left Regina in the spring, and the mothering instinct in them, pent up through all those lonely months, now burst forth in sweet silent tears. I began to realize that Gerald Alton was to be one of the important members of the community.

"Isn't he lovely—lovely?" Jean was murmuring as though unable to tear herself from his side. "Mrs. Alton, I am sure you have placed us all under a debt of gratitude. This community simply had to have a baby."

After that, conversation came easier, and we found ourselves talking about farm life, and the problems of the homesteader. Mrs. Alton drank in every word with avidity; she was eager for information on the most casual affairs.

"I am so frightfully stupid!" she exclaimed. "You see, I know nothing about farming, and I suppose it was a very wild notion that I should take a homestead. I did it on Gerald's account. I shall manage some way, and in three years—by the time he must start to school—the farm will be mine. Then I shall sell it or mortgage it to give him an education."

Here was pluck for you. It was apparent from her language that she was a woman of some refinement; possibly a woman who had never known hard work or privation. A turn in the wheel of fortune, and she was without the money for the education of her boy. A free farm in Canada offered the solution, and the wilds of the West could not deter her.

"By that time we may have a school next door," I suggested. "People will flow in here in crowds, once they make a start. Have you plans for carrying on the work of the farm?"

"I have two men following with boards to build a house; just a very tiny house, in keeping with my purse. Then I hope to

hire a neighbor to do some plowing, and I will plant some corn next spring. I shall raise chickens, and have a great garden—I know all about gardening," she added, naively, with a sudden return of confidence. "You should have seen my English roses!"

We had not the heart to tell her that there lay a great gulf between English roses and a Canadian cabbage patch, and she rattled on, evidently glad of some one to watch with sympathy the mirage castles which she was building on her horizon.

"For myself, I am quite penniless," she confessed, thrusting her upturned palms towards us with a little impulsive gesture. "Gerald is my resource, as well as my responsibility. He has a hundred pounds a year. We shall invest it in this farm. I am sure we are going to prosper wonderfully."

"All the world seems to circle around Gerald," she added, as though it were an after-thought.

She made Jean and Marjorie sit down on a box on which she had spread a steamer rug. Jack and I stood at the door of the tent, where the setting sun blazoned our wind-tanned faces a ruddy red.

"How healthy you men are!" she exclaimed, clasping her fingers in a nervous grip. "If only Gerald will grow up like that!"

"We will come over when the men bring the lumber, and help them build your house," Jack volunteered.

"The lumber—what lumber? Oh, the boards! Oh, how good of you!"

The regard in which she held us appeared to rise another degree.

"And are you carpenters, as well as farmers?" she asked. "How wonderfully clever your men are, here. I had to go to a doctor in Regina—Gerald had a rash, or something—it was in the evening and I found him at his house, building a chicken-coop. Jolly wonderful, isn't it?"

As the shadow of the democrat filled the tent door we spoke of leaving.

"Not until you have had tea," she insisted. "We shall have tea with biscuits and jam. I bought an oil stove in Regina—a most wonderful machine. We shall have it ready in a moment."

While she started her oil stove she asked, casually enough, "And am I the only new-comer in all this big prairie which you have been having to yourselves?"

"No; you are the second," I answered. "We already have one neighbour, a countryman of yours, down on section Two. Spoof, he calls himself, although that is not his real name."

She was working over the stove, with her back toward us, and perhaps she dallied longer than there was any need for, but I took no notice of the matter at the time.

"What a strange name," she said, after a while. . . . "Is he there now—I mean, have you seen him lately? A countryman of mine; you know, I must be interested in him," she added, brightly, turning her face to us again.

Then we told of Spoof's unfortunate attempt to apply a Western corrective to his balky oxen. But she seemed to lose interest in the theme, and changed the conversation to some other topic. Suddenly she remembered her promise that we should see Gerald awake, and, disregarding our protests, she stirred him out of his sleep. His big, blue eyes blinked for a moment at the lamp which she had lighted; then slowly took in his visitors. When he had subjected us to a careful scrutiny he turned to his mother.

"Dem Injuns," he remarked.

"Oh, no, dear, these are not Indians. I am afraid I have let him think that all the people in this country are Indians," Mrs. Alton explained.

"He is not the first Englishman who has thought that," Jack interrupted. "It's a somewhat common opinion."

Mrs. Alton accepted the criticism deftly. "So it is," she admitted, "but then, you see, we *like* Indians, just as we like people of all strange colors, which is something you Americans"—she used the word in its continental sense—"have not

learned to do. No, Gerald, these are not Red Indians, with feathers and paint and bows and arrows, but white people like Mumsy and you, only very much wiser. They are friends from Fourteen and Twenty-two—it is Fourteen and Twenty-two, isn't it?—you see how I am picking up your way of knowing places by number rather than by name—and they have come for a little visit with Gerald and Mumsy and Sandy. Now say 'How do you do, Miss Lane.'"

But Gerald was not in exhibition mood. "Dem Injuns," he insisted, and with that we had to be satisfied.

At length, with assurances that we would repeat our visit soon, and a promise from Mrs. Alton that she would return it when the men had her house under way, we clambered into our wagon and started the oxen on their slow, lumbering gait homeward. Sandy saw us properly off the place, and even stood at attention until we faded out of sight in the twilight. There is likely to be a nip to the night air on the prairies even in midsummer, and Jean, I noticed, snuggled comfortably beside me on the board across the wagon box which served as a seat. . . . Or perhaps it was that for the first time in months the latent motherhood in her nature had been stirred into consciousness.

It was Sunday before we heard or saw anything more of Spoof. A hot summer wind was chasing little scurries of dust and billowing our oat field like a lake of turquoise green when suddenly his tall form loomed up on the rough trail which already wriggled across the prairie from Fourteen to Two. He had discarded coat and waist-coat; in a khaki-colored shirt and corduroy breeches and leggings and an Indian helmet which he had dug up from somewhere he was a picturesque and striking figure as he strode into the grateful shade of the shanty. Under his arm he carried a banjo case.

"I'm tired after a busy week," he explained, "so I didn't bring the bullocks. Moreover, their behavior last Sunday was not exemplary. But I say," he continued, "there must be something in that remedy of yours, after all. They haven't balked since."

"They have learned that you are a man of desperate measures," said Jack.

"They have that. And besides, I fell in with a cow puncher on my way to town; his horse had gone lame and he took a lift with me. He was a veritable mine of expletives."

Spoof took off his helmet and sat down in the shade. A ring of dust had formed on his fair temples and forehead and his brown hair was curly with perspiration. He was a young man good to look at; straight and lean, but not too spare; with white teeth that flashed behind lips always ready to spring to a smile beneath a sandy mustache that had more in it of promise than of realization. His hands were small and finely formed, with long, delicate fingers, and he gave his nails a degree of attention not often found among those so close to the realities of life as were we pioneers.

"Have you tried playing to them?" said Jack, harking back to the oxen. "They are said to be very responsive to music."

"I shall try no more experiments on the bullocks," Spoof returned, pointedly; "not, at least, while I have neighbours at hand who will serve the purpose as well. But that reminds me——"

Opening the banjo case he produced, not only a banjo, but a box of candy, which he had managed to smuggle into it.

"The ladies, I hope, will accept," said he, tendering the candy to Jean.

"If accompanied by a serenade in our honour?" was her quick rejoinder.

"But not until after I have had a bath, and have somewhat recovered my wind," Spoof pleaded, and was excused.

It was evening before he took up his banjo, but almost with the first sweep of its clamoring strings he started vibrations which seemed to catch our little band of exiles somewhere about the heart and squeeze us suddenly hollow with loneliness. Then he sang, dipping into little fragments of repertoire, until at last he hit upon something that Jean had learned before we left the East, and there her clear soprano joined his tenor as naturally as one brook mingles with another and both flow on, singing a new song which is all of the old one, and something more. I had never learned to sing, and while I felt the heart-tugs of their harmony there were other strings tugging at my heart as well.

"But we forgot the greatest news," Jean exclaimed, in a pause after one of their selections. "We have neighbours—two new neighbours—three counting Sandy. They are living on Eighteen, to the east; surely you saw the tent?"

"So I did," said Spoof, "but I thought it might be a wandering Indian family. Two, did you say? A married couple?"

"No, a widow, Mrs. Alton, and her baby Gerald, the dearest little chap. He puts us down for Indians, and with some reason."

"Gerald?" said Spoof. "How old is he?"

"Just turned three, so Mrs. Alton told us. You should see her; not very big, but pluck to the marrow. She has taken a homestead so that she can raise the money to educate her boy. She is coming over as soon as she is settled, and we must have you meet her. She's English, and you'll love her."

Jean's frankness rather set me at ease again. Evidently I was magnifying the grip that Spoof was gaining upon her. She was content that he should love his new English neighbor.

"I shall be wonderfully interested in her," Spoof said, gaily, but it seemed to me that his mind had suddenly gone all a-ramble. There was a moment's silence, then he took up the thread again. "I once knew a little boy of that name—Gerald—was much attached to him. Strange how an incident—a name, for example—will recall a whole chain of memories."

What memories of Spoof's was aroused he did not say, but he sang no more, and presently decided it was time to go home.

CHAPTER X.

It was the first day of August of that first year on the prairies that Jack and I hitched the oxen to the wagon, threw on board a kit consisting mainly of a change of clothes and a blanket for each of us, said a brave but undemonstrative good-bye to the girls, and turned our faces to the older settlements. We had seen Mrs. Alton's new house—twelve feet square, it was, and eight feet high to the plates—under way; we had Spoof's promise that twice a day he would study the shack at Fourteen with his field glass for the flag that Marjorie would nail to the roof in case of any emergency; we had laid up fuel and supplies against the immediate needs of the girls during our absence, and now we were setting forth to earn what money we could during the short season of high wages. Our own oat field could wait; we would cut it for feed, anyway, and a little frost wouldn't matter.

One thing—two things, to be exact—worried me more on that day of parting than I would have cared to confess. One of those things was Spoof, and the other was Harold Brook, of the Mounted Police. Brook might be expected to call any day on his return journey to headquarters—I had hoped that that would be over before I left, and many a glance I shot at the sky-line to the north-west of Fourteen, but without catching a glimpse of the red tunic riding down upon us, as it had done once before, apparently out of the heavens.

The subject was a peculiarly difficult one. For days I questioned myself whether or not I should have a frank discussion of it with Jean, but I finally decided to say nothing, at least for the present. It was a thing which I could not even mention without seeming to cast a reflection on Jean's loyalty, and loyalty, as I have discovered, is one of those qualities which does not improve under questioning. Every question aimed at loyalty seems to knock a beam out of its structure, and I began to suspect that I could not spare any beams from my particular air-castle. So I decided on the bold course of taking everything for granted, and when I said good-bye to Jean I gave no hint of the matter that was uppermost in my thoughts. But Jean, being a woman, probably knew all about it; perhaps the extra warmth and pressure of her hand was an answer to the question which I had not the courage to ask.

On the second day out, as we halted on the side of a little knoll to let the oxen graze and to eat our lunch, we were suddenly aware of the rumble of an approaching vehicle and the tones of a lusty voice, lifted in something evidently intended for song. Even before we had identified the "flyin' ants" we caught the burden of the refrain——

"Lived a min-er, a forty-nine-er,
An' his daugh-ter, Sweet Marie."

"It's Jake, of all the world!" shouted Jack, and together we rushed down upon him. His pudgy form, sheltered from the hot sun by a broad felt hat, lolled on one end of the seat of his democrat. He was alone, and the springs of the seat, from being often ridden on by one person only, had a way of listing to the right and allowing Jake to find his own centre of gravity. In such matters Jake followed the line of least resistance, and bumped along contentedly on the low end of the seat while the other end projected itself abruptly into the atmosphere. His eyes were closed, or nearly so; a healthy freshet of tobacco juice meandered across his chin, and his red, sunburned face was so expressionless that at first we thought he had not seen us. Not until we were at his very wheel did he pull the horses up and show an interest in the surroundings.

"Hello, Sittin' Crow!" was his greeting. "Dang it, stand still a minute, you piebald lump o' fox-bait"—this to one of the bronchoes, switching at a horse-fly—"don' you know your friends when you meet 'em? Well, how goes it on the gopher ranch?"

We shook hands and made him stop and eat with us. "Well, if you're sure there's no dang'rous Injuns 'roun' here," he demurred.

Jake was fresh charged with Regina gossip, and that of the country for two hundred miles around. The settlers were streaming in, he said, but the country was so big it was just like pouring water in the sea. "Only more profitable," he added, thumping his hip pocket.

"This locatin' game is like a pint flask—all right while it lasts, but it don' get anywhere," Jake continued. "I've made some lumps o' easy money, but while I was doin' it other fellers that I brung into the bald-headed were busy bustin' the sod, an' to-day, dang me, they're better off'n I am. Fellows with no more brains than a grindstone! Got a farm an' stock

an' a wife an' kids, an' let me tell you, Crow, them last two is genooiner collaterals. So I figgers to myself, 'Jake, you've trod the primrose cow-path, or whatever it is, long enough. It's time to get down to business.'"

"Yep," said Jake, taking a fresh mouthful of tobacco to give his words time to sink in. "After I saw you fellows trailin' those two fine girls out into the bald-headed I says to myself, 'Jake, this one-horse business is out o' date. Better get into double harness.' So bein' a man of action I wrote out an ad. an' put it in a big paper in the States. Here it is:"

Jake unfolded a scrap of paper from a note-book in which he kept a list of vacant quarter sections and handed it to us to read.

"WANTED—Wife, about 18 hands high, chestnut preferred, sound in wind and limb and built for speed. Good looks not necessary; I'm pretty enough for two. Jake, 148 — St., Regina, Canada."

"Do you mean to say any fish rose to such a bait as that?" Jack demanded sceptically.

"Fish? Shoals of 'em. Say, in about four days I begun to get as much mail as a new millionaire. An' photographs! I wish I had some to show you, but she—Bella—burned 'em all up. They were what I call pictures o' real life. I got so much mail the postman says to me, 'Whatya doin', Jake; startin' a lottery?' an' I says 'Yep'. Guess I wasn't so far out, at that.

"Well, jus' as I was thinkin' o' goin' to a business college an' hirin' a few dozen stenographers, along comes this telegram." He produced a yellow sheet.

Meet me at Regina station Thursday five p.m. youll know me I am the only one in the world. Bella Donna.

"Well, I reckons right off that Bella Donna is an alibi, or whatever you call a false name, an' that some o' the boys is pullin' a gag on me, but like a fool down I goes to the station, an' there I saw her comin' right up the platform like a sandhill crane out of a marsh. I knew her, jus' like she said, so when she comes up I calls her hand.

"Madam," says I, "are you the lady o' the porous plaster?"

"I'll plaster you," says she, "if you give me any o' yer lip. But do you happen to know a Mr. Jake?" says she, gettin' out a paper; "here's his address."

"Know him!" says I. "I should say so. An' in case you're thinkin' o' marryin' him let me tell you somethin', jus' between friends. Jake buries a wife once a year, reg'lar."

"He does, eh?" says she. "Well, I'm promisin' I'll be a relic' before he's a widower," says she. "Relic' is what she said, but it didn't sound right to me.

"That'sbettin' on a cinch," says I, meanin' that she would get the red ribbon for relics at Regina fair already, but my wit goes over her head, as it of'en does, an' she comes back at me with 'Wha'd' *you* know 'bout anybody marryin' Mr. Jake?"

"Everythin', says I, humpin' my wish-bone with importance. 'Jake tells me every thin'. I'm his spiritooal adviser, so to speak, which includes matrimony. The women that wants to marry Jake—lots of 'em rich, too, Madam," I says. "I'm steerin' him clear o' them every day," I says, 'partly out o' sympathy fer them, on accoun' o' his *severe* habits,' I says.

"Who *are* you, anyway?" says she, an' with that I flashes my telegram on her. "I'm the party of the first part," says I, as they say in the law offices.

"With that she fixes me with an eye that made me think o' Sittin' Crow, frocious an' blood-thirsty.

"So you're Jake," she says, pullin' herself up 'till all her angles stood out like the haunches of a starved mustang. "Well, you got a hell of a nerve," she says.

"I begun to think maybe she was about right, but she gave me no time fer reflections.

"Where's a preacher?" she says. "You wanted speed, an' yer goin' to get it." With that she hustled me over town an' had me married before I knew it, so I'd have to settle fer the supper, as I figgered it out afterward. Then after supper we go to my shack an' she climbs into my business papers like a hound after garbage.

"'Wha'd' you do fer a livin', may I ask?' she says, when she finds nothin' in my papers excep' receipts from the grocer's an' a bunch of letters in answer to my ad. 'This correspondence o' yours is interestin', but I wouldn't take it to be very fillin', she says, 'an' anyway, if this is all you have to do you're out of a job,' she says, an' with that she gathers up my bundles o' letters, photos an' all, an' throws 'em into the fire."

By this time the bacon and potatoes were sputtering in the frying pan and the smell of hot tea lent an extra tang to the prairie air, so Jack served the meal and for awhile Jake's account of his matrimonial exploit was lost in a hubbub of vigorous mastication. Bread and potatoes and bacon, washed down with strong tea, disappeared as though by magic, and in a few minutes Jake was in a mood to resume his narrative.

"'Do!' says I, musterin' all my dignity. 'I'm a specialist—a specialist in land. I know the sections with the weak lungs an' the broken knees an' the spavined joints, an' if a man pays me enough I put him wise, an' if he don' I let him get wise at his own expense,' says I. 'I'm a specialist, an' I charge like a specialist,' I says.

"'Humph!' says she, jus' like that. 'Between your fine words I figger that you pick up a dollar now an' again by trottin' these tenderfoot sod-busters out over the bald-headed.' I dunno where she got it, but she had all the language necessary, an' more. 'Let me see your bank book,' she says.

"So I dug it up, an' it showed a balance in my favor of forty-three dollars an' twenty cents. Fortunate there was nothin' in it about the hundred dollars I owed at the livery stable fer the board o' the flyin' ants, but I let sleepin' dogs lie, as the sayin' is.

"'How old are you, Jake, dear?' she says, all of a sudden as smooth as oil.

"'Forty-three,' I says, perhaps because that was the figger in my mind at the moment, an' I was shavin' it a little, at that.

"'Then you've made a dollar a year—so far,' says she, droppin' back to her nat'r'l voice that kind o' sounds like two mill-wheels an' you between 'em. 'You'll die before you're sixty,' she says; 'I can see it in your eyes,' although I wasn't lookin' at her, findin' that rather painful, 'an' leave an estate o' less than sixty dollars. Jake, that wouldn't buy me an outfit fer the funeral, fer believe me I'm goin' to do you justice when the time comes. We're goin' to take a homestead.'

"'Not me,' I says. 'The seat o' my democrat is as near as I want to get to a homestead. They're all right fer sod-busters, but fer a woman o' culture——'

"I thought that would get her, but she was as imperv'ous to compliments as an ox to an oration, so to speak.

"'Very well,' says she. 'If you won't take a homestead, I will.'

"'You can't,' says I, with sudden boldness. 'You ain't a widow.'

"With that she gives me another o' those through-the-gizzard-and-nailed-to-the-wall looks o' hers. 'I will be, in about twenty seconds,' she says, 'if there's any more discussion,' she says. So here we are."

"Have you located?" I asked Jake, when he was silent for a minute, and seemed to have dropped off into meditation.

"'Yep. It was easy fer me, knowin' as I do ev'ry willow between the Souris an' the Saskatch'wan. You remember section Sixteen, that you fellows were lookin' at? I didn't figger it was good enough fer you, bein' clients o' mine, but it would do me in a pinch, so I jus' filed on it myself.'

"Aha!" said Jack, who was always a little shrewder than I. "So that is why we couldn't get Sixteen. Surely you weren't contemplating matrimony so far back as that?"

"Not exac'ly contemplatin' it, but takin' precautions." Jake admitted.

"Rather lets the wind out of your fine story," was Jack's comment. "How much do we take for gospel, and how much for romance?"

Jake clambered to his feet and struck a pose intended to be heroic. "Behold in me a young bridegroom," he orated. "Would you expec' me, on an auspicious occasion like this, to stick stric'ly to the map? Out o' the fullness o' my heart I have given you good measure."

We expressed the hope that Bella Donna would prove a sticker.

"She will," Jake prophesied. "Of course that ain't her real name; I jus' gave you that fer—fer instance, an' her first name's Bella, so it's half true, which is a pretty good average in this country. Wait 'til you see us, a-chariotin' behind the flyin' ants over to Fourteen an' Twenty-two! I'm figgerin' on organizin' a school distric' right away."

We gave Jake our blessing and watched him ride off in his wobbly democrat with its spring seat up-tilted to larboard and his fat figure settling down like a sack with a hat on it. But Jake was evidently in good spirits, for before he had gone beyond ear-shot we heard him singing,

"O my darling, O my darling,
O my darling, Clementine,"

and we knew that all was well with him, at least for the present.

Sitting on the grassy knoll, digesting our lunch by the aid of the straws which each of us was unconsciously chewing, we watched Jake until he was a speck in the distance.

"What do you make of it?" said I at last.

"I'm not saying," was Jack's cautious rejoinder. "Either he's married, or he isn't." Jack had not forgotten the incident of Sittin' Crow.

But we had occasion to be thankful we had fallen in with Jake, for he had been able to direct us to a farmer within a day's drive who hired both us and our oxen for the harvest, or until the beginning of threshing. His name was Keefer; a short, thick-set man of fifty-five, with a stubby whisker turning an iron grey. He received us in his stable yard, hatless and coatless, and with his thumbs hooked under his leather suspenders in the confident manner of one who is accustomed to rely on himself and is not likely to be disappointed.

"I'm a glutton for work," he said, when he had hired us, "and I expect my men to feed hearty at the same trough. I wouldn't put your bulls on a binder on a bet; there's too much side-play to their gait, but I can use 'em discing the summerfallow. You'll have to sleep in the granary, but we all eat together at the house. I'm starting two binders in the morning; I'll expect you to keep up to them, and I'll know by to-morrow night what you're made of."

Keefer was as good as his word. He called us at half past four, while the night was still hanging grey about the buildings, and the stronger stars looked down, cold and steely, through a temperature which had dropped dangerously close to the freezing point. He had an hour's work for us about the stables, and at six we went in to breakfast.

The table was set in the kitchen; Mrs. Keefer and her sixteen-year-old daughter Nellie must have been about almost as early as were we. The breakfast was of oatmeal porridge with milk—the belief that every prosperous farm abounds in cream, is, alas, a delusion;—following the porridge came salt pork and potatoes, with good bread and butter, both the latter the products of the housewifely skill of Mrs. Keefer and her daughter. The table was of boards, covered with oilcloth; Mr. Keefer sat at one end, with a husky chap he called George, his permanent hired man, at his right, and his fourteen-year-old son, Harry, at his left. Jack and I sat opposite, and Mrs. Keefer occupied the seat at the other end of the table from her husband. Nellie did not sit down, but waited on the company until the first table had finished. Apparently there were younger children upstairs, as we heard her admonishing them for their failure to get up; evidently she would eat with them.

"It's early for harvest," Keefer volunteered to us, when he had finished his porridge and was half way through a plate of potatoes and pork. "I didn't figure on it so soon, but the last few days have been hot, and my barley field has come along a-whoopin'. It gives me a chance to try out the binders—and the new hired men."

Keefer smiled as he spoke, but he had a way with him that made us aware that anyone who failed to come up to his standard as a workman would get short shrift around his establishment.

By seven o'clock two binders, each drawn by four magnificent horses, were in the barley field. Keefer drove one team and George the other, and when each had made two rounds we started stooking. I saw Keefer watching us as we started, evidently taking note whether we would follow the binders or go in the opposite direction, and when we did the latter he nodded, as much as to say. "They'll do," and drove on. Although we could not claim to be experienced farm hands we

had lived close enough to farm life in the East to be something better than greenhorns, and our summer on the prairie had made us as hard as nails.

We needed both our strength and our fortitude before sundown that night. The barley crop was heavy, and a trifle overripe, and the sharp-pointed awns which this cereal throws off had a way of seeking out our vulnerable points that was almost devilish. They crawled under our shirts and into our hair and most particularly through our socks just above the boot-tops. The thermometer during the day hung close to the hundred mark, and as the afternoon wore on we gave way to the temptation to drink heavily from the water keg. It was a forty-acre field, which Keefer was bent upon cutting in one day, not because he needed to but because he had laid that down as a standard for a day's work with two binders. But the horses felt the drag of the first day of harvest as much as we did, and as the field grew smaller they lost more and more time at the corners.

By evening the red rays of the setting sun, hitting squarely in our faces, revealed in Jack's eye a glint of the light of battle such as I had seen there only once or twice, and I knew that nothing short of utter exhaustion would prevent him finishing like a thoroughbred. My own muscles were numb, and now seemed to be working quite mechanically; my clothing was saturated through and through, but I had a strange feeling that the limitations of the human body were suspended and that I could go on permanently, like a machine.

The field grew smaller and smaller, and the shouting of Keefer and George at the tired horses grew more and more insistent, but just as it was almost too dark to see Keefer came down the last stretch with his knives flashing clear on both sides of the remaining ribbon of barley.

"Now," Jack shouted in my ear, "for all that's in you!" And drawing from unsuspected reserves of energy which we had stored about us somewhere we went down the field at a run, setting up the remaining sheaves at a terrific pace. Just as Keefer reached the end of his swath we overtook him, and Jack, seizing the sheaf that was still in the binder, tore it from the knotter and flung it to me where I stood beside a stool waiting to receive it.

Then Keefer did a gracious thing. He climbed down from his binder seat and shook hands with us.

"Boys," he said, "I didn't believe it was in you." Which was a very high compliment from Mr. Keefer.

CHAPTER XI.

We worked for Mr. Keefer until the last sheaf of his six hundred acre crop was in stood. Not all of the time were we speeded up as on that first day in the barley field; we had seasons of comparative calm, particularly while waiting for the wheat to ripen, but whatever advances of leisure our employer may have made us during that period were more than repaid when, in the last week of August, two hundred acres of wheat came in with a rush, and a moon in its second quarter threatened frost every night. Keefer brought up four more horses from a ranch which he owned somewhere nearby, and by relaying his teams he was able to keep his binders going during the noon hour. This did not make it any easier for his stookers, but we were now thoroughly hardened to the work, and we had learned, as well, that even in such a simple operation as stooking there may be acquired a knack which saves many a step and many an ounce of effort. We no longer tried to keep four rounds behind the binders; we could look on with equanimity while they obtained a lead of a half day's cutting, and then we worked along the windrows of sheaves, at right angles to the standing grain, instead of parallel with it. This saved a great amount of walking, and we found that what had been a terribly hard day's work at first could now be done without leading us to the brink of exhaustion.

During that last week in August Mr. Keefer hung a thermometer on a clothes-line post in the yard, and notwithstanding his long days in the field he would get out of bed two or three times in the night, and particularly just before dawn, to study the temperature.

"Full moon Friday night," he said to us on Tuesday. "I want this wheat in stood before we sleep Friday."

"Do you think the moon has anything to do with the temperature?" I asked him, not in an argumentative mood, but because I wanted to know.

"Can't say," he answered. "I'm not an astronomer, or whatever it is that could give scientific reasons, but I know we always reckon that if we get by the full moon at the end of August or the beginning of September without frost we're safe for another fortnight. It's like the chicken from an egg; I can't explain it, but there it is."

"But is there really much danger of frost, anyway?"

"Not as bad as it used to be, and it will disappear altogether as more land comes under cultivation, but at present it has to be reckoned with. When the whole profit or loss on the year's operations hangs on a few degrees of temperature, do you wonder that I get up in the night to look at the thermometer?"

Perhaps it was this little insight which Keefer gave us into his anxiety and the reason for it that keyed us up to the effort we were to make during the next three days. I have always held that any man who is worth his pay works for something more than his pay, and certainly for the next seventy-two hours pay was the last thing in our minds. We had to beat the frost-fiend that was crouching somewhere in the low mists of a moonlit night, waiting to sweep down and ruin this vast, defenceless field of wheat that stood nodding complacently in the harvest sun, all unconscious of the enemy that threatened it. That was before the days of the general use of the tractor, and the horses could not work day and night, or I am sure we should have followed them, stooking by the white light of the moon that filled the heavens with a brilliance almost like that of the day.

In the middle of the afternoon Nellie Keefer would drive out with a horse and buggy and bring us a lunch of sandwiches and tea, and the few minutes during which we would sit in the shade of a stood piled high for that purpose while Nellie helped us from her basket and filled and refilled our cups were occasions to be remembered. She was a rather winsome girl, was Nellie; quite without the idealism which made Jean one girl in a million, but possessed of a sturdy and practical ability and a very adequate supply of self-confidence.

"Nellie's a chip off the old block," her mother had said one day when the girl had wrestled a refractory mustang into submission. We had stood by and watched the fight, keeping out of it at Nellie's express command. We were left to infer that, in Mrs. Keefer's figure of speech, Mr. Keefer was the old block.

Well, we won. It was stark moonlight on Friday night, possibly ten o'clock or later, when the binder blades at last ran free at the end of the last remaining ribbon of yellow wheat. For a day and a half, by superhuman efforts, we had been overtaking the lead which we had allowed the binders for the sake of efficiency in stooking, and once again when the packers clattered idly above the last half sheaf Jack yanked it from the knotter and flung it to me where I stood waiting to

receive it. Then we trudged homeward, tired but victorious.

And it didn't freeze, after all. By eleven o'clock a cloud loomed up in the west, and a wind began to lash the oat field. By twelve the rays of the moon struggled but faintly through a curtain of mist. At dawn the thermometer still showed two degrees above freezing.

When we had finished with Mr. Keefer he paid us off and told us where we would be sure to get a job threshing. We shook hands all round, and I think I shook hands with Nellie twice, and I remember she said something about calling in if ever I passed that way, and even suggested that she and Harry might drive over to Fourteen next summer and pay us a visit, for I had told her, of course, of Jean and Marjorie. Oh, well, these things happen. . . .

We found Mr. Alec Thomson with his body half inside the boiler of his threshing engine. As we came up his position reminded me of Jake's figure about a hound after garbage. He was so engaged in his work, and making so much of a clatter, that he didn't hear our approach, and it was not until Jack banged the boiler with a hammer which had been lying nearby that he jumped from his position as though he had been shot in his remaining exposure.

"Good morning, Mr. Thomson," we said when we could get our faces straight. "We came to join your gang."

"You'll join a bigger gang than mine if you give me another scare like that," said Mr. Thomson, looking us over. "Where are you from?"

"Been working for Keefer," we explained.

"Get fired?"

"No."

"Through?"

"Through to the last sheaf."

Mr. Thomson's eyes showed a growing interest. "All right," he said, after a moment. "Any man that can finish a season with Keefer is good enough for me. Put the bulls in the stable and give me a hand with this expander."

Thomson was a bachelor who did a little farming while he was putting in his residence duties on a homestead, but his principal industry and interest in life was in his threshing machine. He must have it perfect to the last bolt and belt-lace, although his shack was a musty affair that gave me the creeps after Marjorie's immaculate cleanliness and even after our own housekeeping performances in Keefer's granary. We stayed with him for a number of days at a nominal rate of wages, helping with the repairs to his engine and separator while waiting for the wheat to harden in the stook.

When at last we were ready for the field Thomson's homestead presented a scene of great animation. He had gathered a gang of men and horses about him; had hired a cook and stocked the cook-car, and had laid in a supply of oil and repairs. Thomson was his own engineer, and it had been decided that I should be fireman, while Jack drove the oxen on a bundle team. After the first day or two I found the work not so hard as stooking although the hours were even longer. I would be in the field at four o'clock in the morning firing up that old straw-burner in order to have enough steam to whistle at six, and I was the last to leave the outfit at night.

Thompson had impressed me with my duties at the start. "Keep one eye on the steam gauge and the other on the water glass, and both on the lookout for fire," he said, "and that's about all you need to know."

I soon found there was more than that to know about firing a straw-burner, but these were the essentials. At times when the straw was still damp after rain I had my troubles, and some mornings, until I could raise enough steam to use the forced draft, Sally, as I called our engine, would be as cantankerous as any kitchen stove when the wind swirls over the roof the wrong way. But I soon learned how to take her moods, and before the season was half gone I began to feel a strange sort of affection for this great, greasy lump of metal as the drone of its exhaust played a monotonous lullabye in my ears and the whiff of steam and tallow lent an additional tang to the edge of my fireman's appetite. The goddess of steam began in some subtle way to draw me into her embrace, and I came to understand how it is that once a steam engineer, always a steam engineer.

"None of those temperamental things for me," said Thompson one day when the first gasoline tractor I had ever seen

went slowly coughing by. "Sally may be a bit mussy and old fashioned, but she has a hell of a punch in her elbow." Just then a damp sheaf from the bottom of a stuck went in crosswise, and the automatic governor valve flew open. Sally snorted in indignation and the force of her exhaust drew my fire up into the flues as she threw double her normal horse-power into her driving-rod.

"Humph!" said Alec, patting the throttle lever affectionately. "I'd like to see one of those coughin' critters chew on a cud like that!"

So the threshing season wore on. We ate in a cook-car, slept in a "caboose," and worked from dawn until dark. Sometimes, to finish a "set" we would burn a straw pile and work by its light after the stars were out in the heavens. Although the work was hard and dirty it was the sort of dirt that is neither offensive nor unhealthful, and there was a certain reckless good-fellowship among the gang that made the time pass pleasantly enough. There were fights on a couple of occasions, when some one brought liquor out from town; one of the men had an arm broken under a belt, and all of us had a scare one day when the field we were working in caught fire from a spark from the engine, but these were mere incidents in a routine of hard work from dawn until dark, and afterwards. At nights the prairie was lit up with the orange-red glow of burning straw piles, their fan-shaped reflections thrust high in the heavens, while the jingle of trace-chains, the rumble of wagons, and the plaintive steam whistles which came through the gloaming from other outfits than our own brought a strange sense of the worthiness of work well done. Tired and prodigiously hungry we would attack the cook-car, and then presently crawl to our bunks and to sleep.

It was the middle of October, and there was a crisp tang in the air night and morning, before we again hit the trail for Fourteen and Twenty-two. During all this time we had had no word from our homes, as there was no one to carry mail in or out, and it was with anxious and eager hearts that we hurried Buck and Bright along the homeward winding trail.

On the second day, as we were bowling along at the two-and-a-half mile an hour clip which Buck and Bright considered the limit of furious driving Jack drew my attention to a speck on the horizon ahead of us. It grew rapidly, and although there was no mirage this time to bring our visitor down from heaven, we soon were able to discern the scarlet uniform of the Mounted Police. It came along at the smart trot to which the police horse is educated, and in half an hour Harold Brook drew up beside us.

"Hello, Lane and Hall!" the policeman greeted us. "Getting back from your harvest excursion?"

So it was evident he knew we had been away, and why. But Jack, whether he thought of this or not, answered him cordially.

"We're on the home stretch," he admitted, "and old Fourteen and Twenty-two will look pretty good to us, after cook-cars and cabooses."

The lightest kind of a smile flickered about Brook's lips. "And so it should," he agreed, "with two fine girls such as adorn your respective homesteads. I was in the district last night."

"Were the girls well?" I forced myself to say, partly because I felt my silence was beginning to shout, and partly because of a real anxiety about them.

"I believe so. I didn't see them, myself; came in by the south and landed first with your neighbour, Spoof. Capital chap; I stayed over night with him, and smoked up nearly all of his English tobacco. At breakfast I finished his last jar of marmalade, so if Spoof is flying a flag of distress when you reach home you will know the cause of it. Imagine an Englishman without marmalade — breakfast without marmalade! My dear fellow, I'm English myself, and I — I assure you it isn't done."

"But the girls?——" I persisted.

"Oh, yes. Spoof has been keeping a neighbourly eye on them. I meant to call on you, of course, but when Spoof told me you were away I stayed with him. He assured me that everyone is fit at Fourteen and Twenty-two."

This was good news, and a weight off our minds. Besides, it was evidence that in the twinges of my jealousy toward Brook I fell somewhat short of doing him justice. Brook was a decent fellow, and was playing the game.

"Just a suggestion," said the policeman, after a moment. "This is your first autumn on the prairies, and you can't be too

careful about fire. These warm days and frosty nights are the most dangerous time of the year. I found Spoof had no fire guards, so I showed him how to make them, and I took the liberty of hinting that he go over to Fourteen and Twenty-two and see that the buildings are properly protected."

We thanked Brook, and he saluted and rode away, his red tunic slowly fading out of view in the cloud of dust which his horse kicked up from the bone-dry trail.

"Very decent chap, Brook," said Jack, after a while, and I said "Yes."

It was with a strange pounding of the heart that we at last discerned the outlines of the shacks of our little settlement. Mrs. Alton's came first into view, then Spoof's, then, together, the buildings on Fourteen and Twenty-two. A gust of homesickness swept up and took sudden possession of me, and I realized for the first time how much I had become attached to the little square on the thousand-mile fabric of the prairies which I had already learned to think of as home. Gaunt and bare they may be, but the prairies have a way of winding themselves about the heart with bands that are stronger than steel.

If we had been anxious, we were eager, too; eager with the news of our successful season's work; with anticipation of the bright faces which would greet the roll of crisp new bank bills that Jack carried in an inside vest pocket; eager to display the load of provisions and supplies which had been bought with part of our earnings.

We must have been fully a mile from the houses when we discerned the first evidences of life. A little figure darted out of the shack on Twenty-two to the edge of the gully; then for a few minutes sank from sight; then reappeared on our side of the stream and rushed into the shack on Fourteen. Almost instantly two figures appeared at the door; paused for a moment, then swooped like wild things down the trail toward us. And we stood up on the top of the wagon and waved our hats and yelled like mad, until even Spoof down on section Two must have heard us. And old Buck and Bright, their phlegmatic souls at last awakened by that strange power that lies at the root of all creation and which is friendship and love and all the shadings of affection which lie between — or perhaps it was by the smell of the haystack at their own stables—joined in the spirit of the occasion and broke forth in a most surprising gallop, their hoofs click-clacking and their trace-chains lashing the whiffle-trees as they ran.

Soon we came up, and there were the girls, wonderful, lithe, sunburned, radiant, hatless, golden hair streaming in the golden light at the end of day, arms extended, white teeth gleaming, measureless, ineffable, in the beauty and wonder of their young womanhood! We sprang from the wagon and—I don't know how it happened — Jean ran straight into my arms. Not Marjorie—I didn't see what became of her—I didn't stop to look;—Jean ran straight into my arms! I held her there, held her with the strength of ten weeks' harvesting in my muscles and of all my young hot boyhood in my veins; held her and kissed her and would not let her go. . . For the first time since we had been little children together, playing by the dam where the water-wheel across the river tossed its dancing diamonds in the air, I held her and kissed her and would not let her go.

Across the fields of crisp and brittle grass we trudged together, disregarding the trail and the measureless swoon of that sunset world as we swept homeward on the flood-tide of our happiness. Her firm little arm pressed tight against mine and our limbs swung together in the rhythm of our stride. And when I looked down in her face I saw a light that was not altogether the glint of the setting sun.

But in that most poetic moment of her life Jean forgot to be poetic. Once more she slipped her arm about me.

"Gee, it's good to have you home again," she said.

And in what should have been my supreme hour I found myself wondering whether Jean's passion was love or just plain loneliness.

CHAPTER XII.

That was a busy night on Fourteen. The girls confessed that they had been on the lookout for us since the first of the month. They had even borrowed Spoof's field glass so that they could sweep the horizon to the eastward far beyond Mrs. Alton's.

"He's the strangest sort of chap, is Spoof," said Jean. "Will you believe me, he hasn't been inside this house since you left? Used to walk over from time to time, and see that the pigs and the cow were living in harmony, and that the fuel had not given out, but was always in a rush home again. Never saw such a man for work; quite different from what he used to be."

Jack looked his sister over with an eye that did not reserve all its approval for Marjorie. "We thought you would have been an accomplished banjo-ist by now," he said.

"Not a lesson—not a single lesson in all this time," Jean grumbled. "And now I suppose he'll be over to-morrow to indulge us with the pent-up leisure of two months!"

Jean's naiveté was little greater than mine. We had been brought up with a sound training in the rudiments of behavior but with little knowledge of its social complexities. My feeling in the matter was a mixed sense of surprise that our neighbour, usually so friendly, had held aloof at a time when he was particularly needed, and of annoyance that Jean should be so obviously put out about it.

But we soon got on to other matters. The girls had dug the potatoes and the garden vegetables, and it was with the honest pride of work well done that they took us into the cellar to view our winter supplies. There is a very real satisfaction in growing one's own food; it gives one a sense of independence, a feeling that the butcher and baker and grocer have no mortgage on one's bodily needs. I think it was that feeling, threaded through with a very homey kind of content, that welled within us as we viewed the heaps of potatoes and turnips and cabbage and carrots and beets and parsnips that filled our cellar to the roof. Jack and I, not to be outdone, felt that now was the moment to show, in concrete form, something of what our harvest labors had meant. We had seized an opportunity while the threshing outfit was shut down on account of rain to drive to the nearest town and lay in a stock of provisions, which Alec Thomson had decently enough allowed us to buy on his account as he, being a contractor, got a better price than the individual consumer. So now we had to carry in the boxes of dried fruits and of canned goods, the sack of sugar, the three sacks of flour, the packages of tea and coffee, the sides of bacon:—Oh, we were going to live well this winter! Then there were the new boots which we had bought all round, and stockings, and an end of cloth which we were sure would come in handy for some useful purpose, and yarn for knitting. We were a happy party.

The girls had a strange treat in reserve for us. It was Jean who told us of it, although, as it seemed to me, her manner suggested a certain lack of frankness very unlike Jean. It seemed that a few days before our return a jack rabbit had loped up within easy distance of the shanty door, where he perked himself on his hind legs, taking observations. Marjorie took the gun down from the wall, aimed it with great deliberation, and fired.

Jean declared that the rabbit was not hit, but that he died of fright. Be that as it may, he furnished the filling for a very deep and tempting rabbit pie.

"And only to think," said Jean, her bright eyes dancing, "it would scarcely have kept any longer. We were managing to freeze it a little at nights, but it would thaw out during the day."

"I don't know but it is a little over-kept as it is," Marjorie admitted, "but we're going to eat it to-night." And so we sat about our little table, with the great rabbit pie in the middle, and great helpings of potatoes and onions on our plates, and flakey white bread and yellow home-made butter within reach, and the light beating down from an oil lamp on the wall, and would not have changed places with any one on earth.

The next day revealed changes in the neighbourhood which we had not had time to notice or discuss in the evening. A number of settlers had come in. The girls had not seen any of them, but could give almost as accurate descriptions as though they had. It seems Spoof had come over to Fourteen every Sunday afternoon during our absence, and, for all the shyness against which Jean had protested, he had managed to regale the girls with the gossip of the community, for our two little shacks were really becoming the centre of a neighbourhood. From Spoof they learned that the Browns had

landed from England with three children and hardly anything else, and had built a shack on the south-west quarter of Four. Mr. Brown had been a game-keeper in England. His wife was a wistful little body who seemed likely to have plenty to wist over before her children were raised on the living that a game-keeper would wring from the soil. On the north-west of Eighteen, just four miles west of us, a Scottish shipbuilder named Smith had located. He appeared to be unmarried. Three miles north of us, on Thirty-four, a Swede named Hanson had built a shanty twelve feet square in which he was housed with his wife and six children, and on Thirty-six a Russian had dug himself a sort of cave in the bank of the gully. He, too, had a wife and numerous offspring, but the exact number had not yet been ascertained.

"Ay tank thar bane plenty," Ole Hansen had said, when discussing the subject with Spoof. And as Ole regarded his own six hopefules as "yust a nice commence," the imagination was rather stirred by the possibilities of what the cave on Thirty-six might disclose to the census taker.

"How do you say his name?" Spoof had inquired.

"Yah don' say it. Yah sneeze it," Ole explained.

"Sneezit—that'll do," said Spoof. And so, quite without his knowledge or consent, our Russian neighbour was supplied with an English name; a name which may some day—who knows?—be borne with pride by one of our best families.

Then there was Burke, an American from Iowa, a man with a lust for labor and for doing things on a big scale. He and his wife had landed on section Twenty about the middle of August, and, ignoring the tradition that it is useless to break prairie sod in the fall, had already turned over a broad strip from end to end of their quarter section. Burke it was who introduced mules into the settlement. From what the girls were able to gather from Spoof mules called for an even more extended vocabulary than did oxen.

"And you want us to believe that Spoof told you all these things without ever coming into the house?" I challenged.

"Never a foot over the doorstep," said Jean. "That is, hardly ever. It's a big country; why be so particular for a foot or two?"

"Oh, I'm not; not at all. I'm merely checking up what you said last night."

"In my intoxication over your return! How could you, Frank?" And with that I had to be satisfied.

"But the best is yet!" Marjorie exclaimed. "Guess who's married?"

"Jake!" we answered together.

"Oh, somebody told. Yes, Jake. He and his wife are settled on Sixteen. They've a little shack up, and Jake is farming the community, as he calls it. 'Acquaintances,' he says, 'are about all I'll be able to cultivate this year.' He spends most of his time at Spoof's, but I don't notice that Spoof's work goes along any quicker on that account. They called on us a couple of times—Jake and his wife, I mean; they have the advantage over the other settlers of having a light wagon and a team of ponies, which make it easy for them to get about. Mrs. Jake impresses one as being angular and competent, with perhaps more heart in her than her appearance would suggest. They say it was an agency match."

At that point we took up the story with Jake's account of his courtship and wedding, censored, of course, to suit the audience.

"That's mostly lies," said Marjorie, in her matter-of-fact way. "He advertised for her all right, but he went to Minneapolis to meet her, and it was only when he promised to go on a homestead that she consented to come. She told me that much; said she'd had enough of the town, and wanted to get away from everything and everybody. She has a touch of humor, too; said, 'I guess that's what I did, all right, when I came out on the bald-headed with Jake.'"

"But the telegram! He had her telegram."

"He must have faked that. He knew he would meet you boys before he went back, and he had a story made up to show himself in the best light possible."

"How about Mrs. Alton?" I asked.

"She doesn't come out. We've gone over a couple of times, and she receives us with great friendliness, but when we ask her to return our visit she always makes out that she can't leave the boy. Of course she could bring him with her, so that is only an excuse. For some reason she wants to stick close to her homestead."

"We must get Spoof after her," said Jack. "He'll drag her out. Now that we have real society in our community a beautiful young widow must not be allowed to 'waste her sweetness on the desert air.'"

We spent a whole day conjecturing about the new arrivals, and marvelling over the strange assortment of humanity out of which it was the business of fate and our lucky stars—no one else seemed to trouble about the matter—to lay in these prairies the foundations of an enduring civilization. Then we settled down to what little work remained to be done. We found our oat crops harvested, and for that we had to thank Spoof and Jake, who had taken that bit of neighbourly service into their own hands. We made the stable snug, banked up the shacks with earth, and lined them inside with brown paper which we had brought from town for that purpose. We cut firewood in our little park by the pond, being careful to destroy nothing but trees which were already dead or were too crowded for growth.

Before we had completed these jobs Spoof paid us another visit. We saw his tall figure looming up across the brown grass one afternoon early in November. The sun was bright, but swung far to the south, and even its brilliance could not drive a certain chilly nip out of the afternoon air. Spoof walked as one who keeps up his circulation by vigorous exercise. He shook hands with a warm, firm grip. He was brown and rugged, and the prairie winds were leaving their mark on his fine English complexion. In the warmth of his grip, in the sparkle of his eye, in the leisurely confidence of his conversation, there was something about the fellow that was decidedly likable.

"Thought I'd just drop in on you, strangers," he commented. "Have a good autumn's work? I hope you did. I ventured to inquire a few times while you were away, just in case the young ladies might need some help — a man around the place, don't you know? I found them most disconcertingly competent. About the only service I was able to do was to shoot a rabbit for them; one of those big white fellows. Jolly good eating, I should say——"

"How long ago was that?" Jack interrupted, sharply.

"Oh, not so long; in fact, they spoke of saving him for your home-coming."

"Aha! And again, Aha! Come along, you conspirator!"

We seized Spoof by the arms and marched him into the house. Marjorie and Jean were there; although we had two houses the girls were nearly always together in the one on Fourteen. Jean declared that Marjorie was much the better housekeeper of the two, and she came there for lessons.

We thrust the somewhat bewildered Spoof into their presence.

"We have discovered your duplicity," said Jack, sternly, addressing the girls. "We now know the secret of Marjorie's marksmanship."

"Oh, by Jove!" Spoof exclaimed. "I seem to have messed things up. I'm afraid you will think me an awful rotter, Miss Hall. Really"—turning to Jack—"really, it wasn't I that shot the bally hare at all——"

"You're only getting in deeper," said Jack. "Fess up, and stay for supper."

Spoof did both, and a jolly night we had, playing euchre after the supper dishes were cleared away. But before he left he recalled that an errand of mercy lay at the bottom of his visit.

"I dropped into Brown's the other day," he said. "Mrs. Brown is a bit fed up. Staring out of the window, and all that kind of thing. Poor old Brown is quite useless; worse than I am, if that is possible, but his wife has quality in her that will count, if she doesn't go under first. She needs you two girls over there now and again, just to put a bit of sunshine in her soul."

"This is a land of sunshine," I said, quite inappropriately.

"Of physical sunshine, yes. But the heart withers up on that alone. You natural born pioneers don't understand. You are the second or third generation at the business, all of you. You glory in the wilderness, you revel in it, you subdue it. The lust of these things is born in you. But she—she is a game-keeper's wife. You can't possibly understand. The memory of

it all; the hedges and lanes and rose-gardens and the—the *security* of England; the memory of these is tearing her very heart out."

"They know where we live."

"They have not been introduced."

"Nonsense!"

"I know it's nonsense," Spoof continued. "I've learned that much. They haven't. Do you think they would be guilty of such an unpardonable thing as to call on you first? You can't understand, but over in England we have a saying, 'It isn't done.' When an Englishman says 'It isn't done,' the argument is ended. After that has been said the thing really isn't done, and everybody understands that it can't possibly be done. Now just hitch up the oxen to-morrow and slip over to section Four and jolly her out of the dumps."

"Well, suppose we do," Jack agreed. "But how about you keeping up your end of the social service? Why wish it all on to us?"

"I don't follow you. I have already been to the Brown's——"

"But not to Mrs. Alton's, so far as we can learn. Mrs. Brown may have no monopoly of loneliness."

Perhaps it was only imagination, but it seemed to me that Spoof's face, usually so frank and open, suddenly became a mask. But he came back quickly and easily.

"I could hardly do that, don't you know? It would not be quite the thing."

"Why not?" said Jean, as ingenuous as ever.

"Why, it would hardly be the thing—it's not in accord——"

"You mean it isn't done," I supplied.

"Exactly; or, at least, it's not supposed to be."

"You were flattering yourself a minute ago," said I, with show of severity, "that you had learned that on the prairies one doesn't wait for an introduction. You have some other things to learn. One is that on the prairies there is no such saying as, 'It isn't done.'"

"My word!" said Spoof. "Isn't that rather dangerous? But of course I know I'm a greenhorn yet, even though I am beginning to ripen in spots. That reminds me, I've had another letter from the Governor. He wants me to shoot him a young chinook."

"A chinook!"

"Yes. When I wrote him a recent treatise entitled 'An Incident in a Hay Field, or, How about a Cheque for a Hundred Pounds'—you will remember the time—I covered the ragged edge of my purpose with a dissertation upon the prairie climate. I told him that it consisted of a melange of everything from Naples at its best to Norway at its worst—from sleepy kittens purring in the sun to wild she-tigers raging through the jungle. From climate I moved to grass by easy stages, and from grass to hay, and from hay to our little conflagration, and from that to the matter of one hundred pounds. On the way I explained that this part of the country is not really in the chinook belt, although occasionally one came down this far. So now I am commissioned to shoot for the Governor a young chinook. He thinks the skin would look a bit of all right on the library floor, don't you know?"

"And of course you will shoot one?"

"A request from one's immediate paternal ancestor, accompanied by a draft for a hundred pounds, is not to be lightly disregarded. We may have another fire some day, and the price of wagons may go still higher."

"Let me think," said Jack, and for a few moments we remained silent to give his mind elbow-room.

"I have it!" he suddenly exclaimed. "Has your Governor ever seen a badger?"

"Not likely, except possibly at the Zoo."

"We must take that chance. You must shoot a badger, Spoof, which we will formally christen a chinook, and send it to your Governor in time for Christmas."

"I think it's just wicked to do that," said Jean, whose sympathies were always with the under dog. "No doubt Mr.—Mr. Spoof, senior, is a delightful old gentleman, and it isn't fair. Fancy some one from America visiting him and Mr. Spoof goes showing off the chinook which his son shot on the banks of the Saskatchewan. 'Chinook nothing!' says the visitor. 'That's a badger, as common as rabbits, almost, and I would describe your son as another prairie animal, smaller than a badger, with two stripes down its back.'"

"Oh, listen to Miss Prim!" Marjorie interrupted. "Who would think she had a letter from her mother asking if she was canning any buffalo beans?"

It was not until Spoof's tall form had dissolved out of view in the starlight that it occurred to me how skilfully he had changed the conversation from the subject of Mrs. Alton. It was something to think about.

CHAPTER XIII.

We did as Spoof suggested. Early the next afternoon we hitched Buck and Bright to the wagon and wended our slow way south-westward, Jack and I taking turns in the exclamatory exercises by means of which the oxen were kept in motion. The prairie now was very brown and bare, and only the more hardy gophers remained about to whistle saucily at our carry-all lumbering by. The dazzling sunshine seemed to have lost its force, and there was a presage of coming winter in the air. We dropped into silence save for the noises of our locomotion.

"The world seems to have died," said Jean after a long period of thoughtfulness.

The expression was an appropriate one. The world was, actually, dead. Every blade of grass was a stark little corpse, swaying ghostly to the stir of the cold air. Soon the shroud of Winter would be woven about them, flake by flake, mantling them all in its cold, white tomb.

"But in the spring it will live again," Jean continued, after a pause. "That is the life eternal."

Jean was a strange girl. Her thoughts went on and on, reaching out, and out. She seemed to live always on the verge of the infinite. . . .

At length we were at Brown's. The rickety shack, smaller than either of ours, presented a sad and forlorn appearance. Three little faces were crowded in the single window that covered our approach. Brown himself was busy building a stable of sods, and succeeding very badly in his work. He could scarcely be distinguished from his building material, but when he saw us he shook himself, as a dog shakes off water, and came up, touching his cap.

"We are your neighbours from Fourteen," we announced ourselves. "May we go in?"

"You may, and welcome," he said. "The wife will be a bit fuddled. I'm not the most presentable, myself."

Then Jean did a great thing; one of those wonderful things that no one but Jean seemed to think of. She clambered to the side of the wagon and held out her arms.

"I'm all dirt, Miss," Brown protested. "I'm all earth and sand." But he came slowly forward to her outstretched arms, and when his hands reached hers he took her and gently helped her down.

"Thank you, Mr. Brown," she said.

But Brown was looking at her and at us with eyes that had suddenly gone misty with a mist not of the sods or of the sand. Two little pools of water gathered and streaked a slow, dusty course across his grimy face. . . .

Inside we found Mrs. Brown 'a bit fuddled,' as her husband had predicted. At first she merely stood wringing her hands, but when Jean and Marjorie kissed her, and then kissed the little Browns, the veil suddenly lifted and she was all kindness and hospitality. What a day it was, after we began to get acquainted! Marjorie and Jean had brought some home-made candy, and in a few minutes the little Browns were smeared and happy and slipping gently about looking into the faces of our girls as though they verily believed them angels.

After awhile Marjorie and Jean managed to explain that it was quite the thing in Canada, when visiting a neighbour, to carry your eatables with you, and produced a well packed basket out of our wagon. We had to saw up a board which Mr. Brown was using in his building operations in order to make an extension of the table so that all might sit down together. And when we had done that Mrs. Brown surprised us all by covering it with a cloth of the finest Irish linen, and producing from somewhere a setting of hand-painted china, aided and abetted by a tea service of real silver. And after supper Brown showed us his fire-arms. He had a perfect arsenal of them, when he was in much greater need of a cow. And Mrs. Brown, I know, was showing the girls wonderful things out of boxes. And when it was all dark and starry we hitched the oxen to the wagon, and shook hands all round, and kissed the children all round, and the girls kissed Mrs. Brown, and Mr. Brown forgot himself and kissed the girls, and Jack and I almost kissed Mrs. Brown, and we drew slowly away, waving our hands and watching the five figures framed in the doorway against the yellow light of the oil lamp on the opposite wall. And we knew that in some way we had brought the hedges and lanes and rose-gardens of England down to that crude shanty on section Four and had woven them about another little sentry-box on the most skyward trenches of civilization. . . . And the next day Jack and I drove over again and showed Brown how to build a

sod stable.

Our experience with the Browns encouraged us to cultivate the acquaintance of our other neighbours, and as the short, bright days of November wore by the low-hanging sun often saw our ox-wagon wending slowly across the prairies, and the North Star and the Great Dipper were the silent witnesses of its return to Fourteen. Sometimes, too, the great magician of the North would light his mimic candles, and we would creak homeward in the weird light of their flickering battalions minuetting on the stage of the universe. Smith, the Scotsman, and Burke, the American, received us with undivided hospitality and that strange sense of common interest which is the most priceless thing about pioneer life; one of the rich qualities of human nature which seems inevitably to dry up in the more complex civilisations. Ole Hansen entertained us for a full hour in the stable before his buxom Olga consented to admit us into the house. When at last we were granted that privilege there were evidence of hurried scrubbing of floors and faces.

"My wife bane all the time yust on the yump," Ole explained apologetically. "Some time Ay tank by damn we have too many kids, eh?" It appeared that Ole was beginning to harbor some modern ideas about the size of families. His opinion that six was "yust a nice commence" was being shaken. The housing problem was coming home to him and bearing its inevitable fruit.

No such radicalism had yet filtered into the mind of the Russian, who, for the sake of convenience, we continued to call Sneezeit. He met us stolidly where the trail wound down the bank of the gully near to his dug-out. He wore a long sheepskin coat, with the wool still on it, high boots drawn well up on the thigh, and a brushy black beard. He regarded us in silence, and at length Jack spoke.

"We are your neighbours. We have come to call on you. We hope you are well."

The lips under the black mustache parted slowly, showing a set of strong, regular, teeth.

"No much Angleesh," he remarked.

We clambered down and shook hands. This seemed to assure him of our friendly intentions, and when we managed to make it clear that we wanted to visit his house he led us to it without hesitation.

It was merely a cave dug out of the side of the gully. The front was roughly built up with stones and sods, and a crude door, made of pieces of packing boxes, afforded admittance. The only light was from an opening in the door, which could be closed when the weather was too severe.

Sneezeit went first and addressed some words in Russian into the gloom. We followed, encountering in the door the fumes of the place's bad ventilation. It was some time before our eyes became accustomed to the darkness, but presently we discerned a woman stooping, indicating a long bench which had been set for us. Across the cave was a drove of children, their eyes peering and shining like those of wild animals. Indeed, it seemed that eyes were the most noticeable thing in that very humble little home. Presumably there were mouths as well; no doubt Sneezeit and his wife had reason to know that there were mouths as well as eyes.

The Russian talked "no much Angleesh," and his wife none, so our conversation was somewhat restrained. Presently, however, we became aware that the woman was performing some operation on a little rusty stove which sat near the front of the cave, so that its crooked stove-pipe might find exit through the roof. After a little she brought out some tin cups and served tea. Sneezeit, wiser than our friend Brown, had provided himself with a cow, and the strong tea, well diluted with milk, made a very good drink indeed. She served also a kind of dark, flat bread which bore more witness to her hospitality than to her skill in domestic science. There were no other dainties.

When we had eaten and drunk we prepared to go, but not until Jean and Marjorie had distributed some of their home-made candy among the children. We had hoped during this process to take a census but the sudden commotion which it created made our statistics unreliable. Marjorie said there were eight; Jean, ten; Jack made no estimate. I was disposed to agree with Jean's figures.

After we came out of the cave our host, apparently wishing to give evidence of his friendship, led us to a shed which he had built close to the edge of the little stream that meandered along the bottom of the gully. He had covered it with a stack of prairie hay, so that it was quite warm. Inside were a yoke of oxen, a cow, two pigs, and a number of hens and ducks. The pride of the Russian's face as he showed them was something to behold and afterwards go away, humbled

and thinking. Sneeze was on the road to independence! The drab curtain of oppression which had hung about the Sneeze since the beginning of their race he had torn in two, and through the rent his grizzled face beheld a world of hope and promise, a world in which he was as good as his neighbour!

As soon after our return from harvesting as our duties permitted it we paid another visit to Mrs. Alton. Sandy saw us afar off and swept down upon us like a tornado. Apparently he had known us at the first glimpse, or the first sniff, whichever was his source of information, for there was no question this time about our welcome. His barking and tail-wagging accompanied us all the remainder of the way to the little box that Mrs. Alton called home.

The widow had had time to dress since we hove in view—that is one of the advantages of prairie life not set out in the immigration booklets—and it was a dainty and spick-and-span Mrs. Alton that greeted us when our wagon lumbered up to her door.

"I said, 'It's our friends from Fourteen and Twenty-two'—you see how I am picking up your prairie way of numbering your farms instead of naming them—I said, 'It's our friends from Fourteen and Twenty-two' as soon as I heard Sandy's first bark. That was before you were in sight, so far as my poor eyes could see. But Jerry, who was up in the wagon playing teamster cried, 'I see dem, Mudder; oxes and Mith Lane.' He's crazy about Miss Lane."

"Jerry is a young man of discrimination," I said, scoring for once. But my wit was lost in the wild and panting hug which Jean was bestowing upon my rival.

"So he's Jerry now," said Jean, releasing her embrace enough for speech. "That sounds like getting down to earth. Ever so much more chummy than Gerald."

"Do you think so?" Mrs. Alton queried. "And I had vowed that, *whatever* came, I never would call him Jerry. Too reminiscent of Jeremiah, and lamentations, and all that sort of thing that I wanted to get away from." Mrs. Alton stopped short, as though she had said more than she intended, then brightly took up the thread again. "I vowed I would leave my lamentations behind," she continued. "I take it that this is a country where there is room for everything but regrets."

It was evident that Mrs. Alton's bereavement was filling a good part of her mind, so Jean deftly switched the conversation back to the boy, and presently was conducting a foot-race to the chicken shed with herself, Jerry, and Sandy as the competitors. Sandy won.

We had tea, of course, and after Jerry had gone to bed and Sandy had lain down with his chops on the floor between his paws and his tail thumping the boards occasionally in approbation Jack got out our much worn deck of cards and we initiated Mrs. Alton into the mysteries of pedro. With a beginner's luck she and Jack were much too successful for Jean and me, and when it was time for us to go we insisted that she must visit Fourteen some night soon and give us a chance to return the drubbing.

"I should *so* like to, but I can't leave Jerry," Mrs. Alton explained.

"But Jerry must come, too," we countered. "Jerry and Sandy, and, if necessary, the cow and the chickens. Now you simply must, or some night we will come over and kidnap you by force." But Mrs. Alton would give us no definite answer.

There was no such hesitation at Jake's. Jake met us in the yard, hatless, coatless, vestless, although the temperature was flirting with the freezing point.

"Welcome, Sittin' Crow!" he exclaimed. "And all the other little crows. I suppose you've come to condole with me in my affliction?"

"What affliction?" we inquired, half misled by Jake's manner, for he was an expert in simulation.

"She's inside — an' in possession. It's fort'nate fer me this country runs so much to outside, fer that's all I've any claim on."

But by this time Jake's wife appeared in the door. "Come on in, girls," she cried, "and never mind that blatherskite. He goes around half dressed, keeping himself warm thinking up nonsense. I tell him some day he'll freeze his hair, and that's his finish, for I won't stay married to a bald man, whatever happens."

"Tut, tut," returned her spouse. "Where Bella Donna is put, she stays. That's her strong point."

It was an afternoon of much badinage we spent at Jake's, but under the surface there were evidences that our former land guide regarded his wife with a sort of awe which he tried to obscure from public view by a smoke screen of raillery. Bella, it was apparent, was a woman of character, and although Jake could scarcely be described as plastic in her hands, his recasting was only the harder on him on that account. He was in the mills of the gods, and they proposed to make a job of it.

"I don' know whether she'll make me a good wife or not," he confided in me, "but I reckon she's set on makin' me a good husband."

But Bella's house was clean, and Bella's table was well set, as pioneer tables go, and Bella was a living concentration of energy such as Jake needed to spur him into purposeful activity. It was Jake's weakness that he would drop a job any day to perpetrate a joke.

"He thinks he's a joker," said Bella, acidly, anent this characteristic of her husband, "whereas he's only a joke. There's a big difference."

"I admit the joke's on me," Jake returned meekly. "I should never ha' showed that telegram."

This, of course, brought up the version of Jake's matrimonial adventure with which he had entertained us that August noonday on the prairie, and the totally contrary version which his wife now took occasion to present. Block by block she knocked the underpinning from under Jake's carefully prepared explanation of how he had fallen from the ranks of the unwed.

"Admitted that the telegram was a forgery," said I, at length. "What about the advertisement?"

"That was the only genuine thing about it," Bella returned. "And I've been thinking seriously that Jake missed his calling; he should have been an advertisement writer. When I read that notice I said to myself, 'Here's something out of the ordinary.' . . . I was right."

We left that night with assurances from Jake and Bella that they would visit us twice a week all winter—a promise which they almost kept.

But not all our visiting was with our new neighbours. Most of it, as you may suppose, was back and forth between Fourteen and Twenty-two. Spoof we counted on to make a fifth spoke in our circle every Sunday, and the banjo lessons, neglected during our absence, were now taken up in earnest. It gave me a little orthodox shiver to think what my strict Presbyterian parents would have said to Jean picking so perverted an instrument as a banjo on a Sunday afternoon, and blending her voice with Spoof's in "The Road to Mandalay". But I was little happier when they abandoned the secular for such old airs as "Abide With Me" and "Blest be the Tie that Binds".

Toward the end of the month we had our first snowfall. Old Sol that morning had a mimic sun on either side, and there was a frosty glitter in the air in which our neighbours' shanties gradually faded out of sight as though hidden behind a veil of crystal tapestry. By noon a grey pall shrouded the sky and the snow began to shake down as gently as feathers fluttering from the bosom of some mammoth bird which had taken the world to be her nest, and in spring would hatch again the ancient miracle of life. Marjorie and I stood in our door and watched the big flakes descending, slowly, silently, resistlessly, settling on wagon and hay rack and every blade of grass. Across the gully, as through a slowly falling curtain of ivory lace, we saw the vague forms of Jack and Jean watching them, too. By mid-afternoon the ground was white.

Next morning we looked upon a new world. The snow had ceased falling, the sky was clear and bright, and the stars were still visible at our rising hour. Then up came the sun, splashing the heavens amber and orange and blood red, and suddenly setting a million tons of diamonds ablaze with his own brilliance.

After the snow came we seemed to cling to each other's company even more than before. It's a solemn thing to lie alone in a world of snow. Perhaps its coldness, its stark whiteness, its vast silence suggest that which makes the heart reach out for some warm pulse of friendship. Perhaps its peace and beauty stir something in our nature that insists on being shared.

CHAPTER XIV.

Days wore by; sometimes days of unbroken sunshine; sometimes days of gently sifted whiteness fluttering out of a grey sky. In a week all the prairie was blanketed deep with snow.

Then came the great night.

At this time of the year, in this latitude, it is dark by five in the afternoon, particularly if the sky happen to be overcast. On the day in question Jack and I had done up our few chores about the stable, carried in a supply of water and firewood, and returned to our shacks for supper. Marjorie, brisk, efficient housewife that she was, had the table set when I came in. Our meals were perforce simple, and when we had finished and the few dishes were cleared away I looked at my watch. It was barely six o'clock.

"This is going to be another of our long, long evenings," Marjorie remarked, with what seemed like a suggestion of complaining. "Suppose you ask Jack and Jean to come over; I don't feel like going out in the snow."

"Jean may not feel like going out either," I retorted. "I guess she's as much like sugar as you are," I added, having in my mind some reference to an adage about sugar melting.

"I fancy you think she's a good deal more like sugar than I am, brother o' mine," Marjorie returned. "Well, run along and find out."

Later, when I recalled that remark, I was struck with its significance, but at the moment I had no suspicion that Jack and Marjorie were working a scheme on me. I have always held that Jean was innocent of any part in it.

So urged, I pulled on my pea-jacket and overshoes and fur cap and started out on the hundred-yard jaunt from our shack to the one across the gully. As I came out of the door the snow was falling thickly but in smaller flakes than usual; the air seemed filled with a mist of snow, and there was a rising wind, but the temperature was not uncomfortable. I could see the dull yellow glow of the light in Jean's window across the gully and a thing that struck me at the moment was that nothing about that glow offered any clue to the distance at which it was located. Had I not known I might have believed it a mile away, or within a dozen yards.

I made the trip without difficulty and entered without knocking as was our custom in our numerous visits back and forth. Jean looked up from the table where she sat reading.

"Alone, Frank?" she said, when I had closed the door behind me.

"Yes; where's Jack? I came to see——"

"Jack left for Fourteen some time ago. He was going to ask you and Marjorie to come over. You must have passed him."

"That's rather funny. That's what *I* came for, if you reverse it. Strange I didn't see him on the way."

"He may have looked in at the stable again, to make sure that the stock are all right," Jean suggested. "He said it looked like rough weather."

I stood for a moment, undecided whether I should go back for Jack and Marjorie, or ask Jean to go with me. It was she who settled the question.

"Take off your things, Frank," she invited. "Jack will be there by this time, and will keep Marjorie company. It is not a good night for a girl to go walking."

So I stayed, although a little self-consciously. Jean and I had known each other's company since childhood, but, at least since coming to the West, we had hardly seen each other alone. Always Jack or Marjorie, or both, were somewhere about. There had been, of course, that sudden, impetuous, unspoken revelation when we returned from our harvest absence in the settlements, but there had been no talk of love between Jean and me. I had treasured that moment as a bit of wonderful memory, as a glimpse of wonderful promise, but I had not presumed upon it; I had concluded that two months' loneliness had been too much for Jean's reserve, and that she had done something it hardly would be fair to talk about. . . . Doubtless Jack, when he found I had missed him, would be back shortly.

I took my wraps off and sat down beside the stove. The warmth was very pleasant after the buffeting of the snow, and Jean looked very lovely and tempting in the soft glow of the lamp on the table. I felt a strange embarrassment growing upon me as the moments were ticked off by the little alarm clock on the shelf. The embarrassment grew until I felt that I must break it by speech of some kind.

"What are you reading?" I ventured at last.

"Nothing."

"Nothing! You have a book——"

"I know, but I'm not reading it."

"Then what *are* you doing?"

"Just waiting."

"Waiting? For what?"

Then she looked up at me, and there was a light in her eyes that was strange and good to see, but it sent my brain reeling. For a moment she looked at me thus, and started my heart thump-thumping like a steam pump. Then her eyes drooped.

"Don't you know, Frank?" she murmured.

Her face was ruddy in the glow of the lamp, and the pink skin shone with a color that was not all reflected. Amazing as was her revelation I could no longer fail to understand it. I rose and walked to the table; I took her hands in mine and lifted her to her feet.

"You are waiting for me to—kiss you, Jean," I whispered.

She was trembling, but she spoke with outward composure. "There is something else, first."

"Something else—first? I don't understand."

"You should."

I could not follow her thought. "I kissed you once before," I ventured.

"Many times before."

"No, only once. The other times were when we were children. They don't count."

"Do things that happened when we were children not count—with you?"

"Do they—with you?"

"Ask me, and see."

It had come; the moment of which I had told myself in dreams and visions; the moment to which I had looked forward with a strange fear and a great hope. "Jean," I whispered. "I love you. Will you be my wife?"

As I write the words they seem very bare and matter-of-fact. But they were all that Jean required. She made no spoken answer, but she turned her face to mine, and I drew her up in my strong arms and kissed her in the breathless passion of our young love. . . .

After a time, with one box serving us both, we talked of our future. I hinted that circumstances made our immediate marriage somewhat dependent upon the course that Jack and Marjorie might elect to follow. I took it for granted that Jack and Marjorie would marry, but I was very vague in my idea as to when this would happen.

"I don't think we shall have to wait on Jack and Marjorie," Jean remarked, knowingly. "I rather think they have been waiting on us."

"Then they need wait no longer," I said, boldly. "I am ready at once; now."

"We might make it by Christmas," Jean remarked, more thoughtfully. "We can't afford any special wedding clothes but we can at least afford a few weeks' anticipation."

"Then Christmas be it!" I exclaimed. "Oh, Merry Christmas!"

I was so stirred with a strange new joy that all the future looked rosy and inviting. But suddenly I felt Jean's arm tighten on my neck and I looked up in her face just in time to catch the splash of a warm tear on my cheek. I was immediately filled with wonder and misgiving. What could make Jean cry, in a moment of such happiness? I pressed the question.

"I'm not sorry," she said at length, "but I'm a little—frightened. Not for you; for myself. Oh, my dear Frank, my dear boy—will you always—will we always—love each other as we do to-night?"

Man-like, I assured her that of course we would. She rested her head against mine, and for awhile she seemed to nestle at peace in the soft luxury of our love. But presently a shiver ran through her frame, and, drawing back a little, she looked me fairly in the eyes.

"You know, Frank," she murmured, "it seems strange to say it, but I am so glad to get this settled."

"Not gladder than I, little one," said I, shaping my lips to endearments with the awkwardness of my racial reticence. "You couldn't be gladder than I am."

"I have wanted so long," she continued, almost disregarding my interruption, "to get it settled—to be sure of myself—to know just what is going to happen."

"To be sure of yourself? How sure of yourself?"

She dropped into a moment's silence, as though studying her words before attempting an answer. "You won't misunderstand, I think, Frank," she said at length, "if I tell you that I have been somewhat like a traveller on the prairie who comes upon two roads, and is not quite sure which he should take. Let us say a storm is sweeping down from the North, and his very life depends on the right decision. But the longer he stands there, looking at them, the harder it is to make the choice. It's a comfort to choose, and be on one's way."

"But suppose he chooses the wrong way?" I blundered out, only half following her meaning.

"Oh, Frank!" she cried seizing my shoulders in her strong, supple hands. "It mustn't, mustn't, *mustn't* be the wrong way! I won't have it the wrong way—I won't think of *that* as possible! See, here we are. And we have known, always, since we were little children, that we were for each other, haven't we, Frank? It has always been settled, in Heaven, don't you think, and we have just confirmed it? Oh, I know it has—I know it has!"

"I have never doubted it," I said. And even as I uttered the words the first little poisoned arrow of doubt in some way dodged through my armor and stung me in the heart. Perhaps it was the reaction to Jean's vehemence; perhaps it was that I saw her striving over-hard to convince herself. And from being over-sure I now craved to be assured.

"You are quite sure?" I ventured, after another silence in which I felt that subtle poison slowly chilling through my veins. "You are quite sure you should not have taken the road to section Two?"

"Oh, Frank!" For a moment she buried her face in my shoulder, then she lifted her head proudly, like one who goes forth resolutely to try his spirit in some great issue. "Yes, I'm sure! Spoof is to me only a neighbour, an acquaintance, always. I am quite sure."

"And there was no third trail, no little-beaten third path, that might have been the one to be chosen?" I persisted, anxious to stifle my demon of doubt at its birth.

"You are thinking of Brook," she caught me up instantly. "Let that give you no uneasiness. Brook was only an incident—a rather pleasant incident," she added, and for the first time I realized how exquisitely tantalizing Jean could be, "but an incident after all. Let's not talk about it, or think about it, any more, at all. Everything is settled."

So, by force of will, we turned our minds into happy, unquestioning channels, and talked of the future, our future—and built fairy dream-castles that were most wonderful things to dream about. From time to time Jean arose from my knee to throw fresh wood on the fire, but she needed no coaxing to return. Some strange phenomenon had already occurred

between us, and Jean, with all her gentleness and beauty and delicacy, no longer walled herself about with quite the same barrier of shyness as had been her custom. But her soul, I knew, was as pure as the snow sifting across the white prairies outside.

At last we had to come back to earth. "It's growing colder," said Jean, as she again replenished the fire. Then, glancing at the little clock on the shelf, "Why, it's after midnight! Jack is late."

"Are you uneasy for him?"

"No—why should I? Jack is all right. And I have you. But I thought he would have been back before this. . . . Listen!"

We strained our ears, and presently became aware that what had seemed to be the silence of the night was really full of noises. The wind whined with an eerie note about the eaves of the little shack, and the tremor of its pressure ran through the board walls and wrung mournful creakings from the slender framework of the building. Above all came a sound of rushing, as though the night itself swept by, drumming on the tin chimney-piece as it went. The incessant lash of snow against the black panes of the windows gave further notice of the rising storm.

"Perhaps I had better go home," I said at length. "Jack is doubtless waiting there until I turn up."

"You have the same privilege to wait here until he turns up," Jean commented. "Still, I suppose it's the right thing to do."

So, reluctantly enough, I got into my pea-jacket, cap, and over-shoes, and with Jean's good-night kiss on my lips, and a promise to come again very soon, I opened the door. The moment I did so the suction of the storm put out the light, and the next instant a flail of icy snow particles lashed through the room. I pressed the door shut again while Jean found matches.

"Such a night!" she exclaimed. "Is it quite safe to try it?"

"Of course! It's not a hundred yards, and I could make it with my eyes shut."

So, with another farewell (for good measure) I started again, Jean shading the lamp while I rushed through the door and closed it behind me. My first sensation was of having been clutched by the neck; of being strangled in a grip which I could not throw off. In a few moments the worst of that sensation passed, and my lungs began pumping violently, working against the partial vacuum created by the storm. It was not very cold, but the snow stung the face where it struck; it clung in the eyebrows, melted, and ran into the eyes, blurring such poor vision as there was in the gaunt greyness that buffeted from every side.

I looked for the light of the shack on Fourteen, but it was nowhere to be seen; evidently its faint rays could not beat their way through the hundred yards of swirling tempest that intervened. So, taking careful note of my directions, I started out, my head bowed to save my face from the lashing of the storm; my legs wallowing uncertainly through the varying depths of drifts.

At length I knew I had come to the edge of the gully; although I could see nothing I was aware that I was going sharply down a steep slope. Here at points the snow was already piled in great drifts and I plunged through it waist deep, only to come suddenly upon a bare, icy spot where I lost my balance and fell. I was now at the bottom of the coulee, and the ascent proved even more difficult than coming down. I had to plow through deep drifts and scramble up icy ledges, and I could only suppose that I had reached the top by the greater violence of the storm. Nothing was to be seen but a grey mist; my eyes were almost completely closed with snow and ice. I was not cold; indeed, I was warm, but I began to realize that my exertions and the strangling sensation I felt in breathing were quickly exhausting me. However, there could not be much farther to go, and I pressed on.

It is wonderful how little sense of distance the average man has when deprived of the service of his eyes. He may walk a road every day in the year and yet have but a faint idea of the number of paces it represents. He probably could not tell you how many steps there are in the stairs of his house. As to direction he is even more hopelessly at sea, and when, in addition to these difficulties, he is plunging waist-deep through snow drifts and buffeted by a fifty-mile gale he is in imminent danger of becoming hopelessly lost. Just how near to that state I had come I began to realize, and it was with more relief than I would have cared to admit that I at length discerned a faint glow of yellow light battling against the storm and throwing fantastic spectres into the night. I was soon at the shack, and, groping my way along the wall, I reached the door and burst in.

Jean was sitting by the stove, her wonderful hair down about her back and neck, her face resting in her hands, her feet on the rail of the stove and her dainty ankles peeping out from under her woolen skirt. But for the moment my appreciation of her charms was buried in amazement.

"Jean! What are you doing here?"

"Frank! You've come back! What is the matter?"

I threw off my mitts and rubbed the snow from my eyes while Jean took my cap and shook it and then stood by, eagerness and apprehension in her face. Then, when I was quite sure I was not in a dream or a mirage, "I guess I'm back on Twenty-two, am I?" I said, as one who, suddenly awakened from sleep, finds it impossible to recall his surroundings.

"You're on Twenty-two all right, but why did you come back? Not that I'm not glad to see you—you know I am, Frank, dear, always—but, why did you come back?"

"I guess it's because my time hasn't come," I answered, soberly. "I've heard of getting turned around in a storm, but I didn't know it could happen so easily. I suppose it was when I fell at the bottom of the gully."

"Well, you're here, and we're not going to take any more chances," said Jean, slipping her arms about my neck when I had told her. "We're going to have a little supper, and if Jack doesn't come you will stay until he does."

Jean hustled about and my eyes followed every graceful movement as she prepared hot tea and made toast at the fire, and found a jar of preserves that she had cached away for some special occasion. And when we had finished our betrothal banquet she gave me a lamp and sent me into Jack's room. And after a little her limpid voice called to me a last good-night, and through the open doorway of my partition—we could not afford unnecessary doors in those days—I saw her slender hand tossing me a caress. And then her light went out, and I lay under Jack's warm blankets listening to the roar of the storm and hoping Jack was quite all right, and marvelling at the amount of happiness one human heart can hold. My doubts were gone; my faith was again the faith of a little child. And my mind wandered back into the past and picked up again those tender days of childhood when Jean and I played together beside the dam, and the sober mill-wheel across the stream flung its myriads of diamonds in the air. And Jean had saved me in those days, and I was to be hers—hers, and she mine, forever!

CHAPTER XV.

I awakened with a consciousness that the shack was very, very cold. Under the blankets I was warm enough, but the breath with which I filled my lungs was the breath of the Arctic. The cabin was in inky darkness. Outside, the whine of the gale had risen to a roar, and the frail timbers of the little shanty creaked and trembled under its fury. I thought of Jack, and wondered. The telephone—best of all God's good gifts through the inventive mind of man to those who live in the isolation of vast distances—was as yet not in general use on the prairies. As I look to-night at the telephone on my desk by means of which I can speak instantly to Jack's house or any other house in the neighbourhood I am reminded that these miracles of to-day are accepted so much as a matter of course that we are in danger of forgetting what the world was before they came. But that night there was no telephone on my wall, or Jack's; no fire-shod messengers from house to house could bear through the storm the cheerful news that all was well.

So I thought of Jack and wondered. Jean had accepted his absence with composure; she afterwards said that Brook, the Mounted Policeman, had told her that the man who was prairie-wise, when caught away from home by a storm, stayed where he was safe, even if his doing so occasioned some uneasiness to his friends.

"It is better that your friends should be uneasy while the storm is on than that they should follow you with flowers when the weather clears," Brook had declared, and Jean, after accepting the philosophy, had passed it on to Jack. She had no doubt that he was as safe on Fourteen as was I on Twenty-two.

But I had none of this philosophy to steady me, and I was decidedly uneasy about Jack. My brief wrestle with the storm had shown me how easy it was to become hopelessly lost even among the most familiar surroundings and how soon exhaustion would overpower one. A little irresistible shiver of nervousness ran up my spine as I realized how fortunate I had been in coming back to my starting point. I might have missed it and gone on into the night. . . .

As the frost settled down about me I at length, by a great effort, sprang out of bed and went groping for my clothes. I was not yet pioneer enough to know that it is fine business in very cold weather to sleep with your clothing, or at least your underwear and socks, under your pillow; it lessens the ordeal of that first break from the warm blankets into the wintry atmosphere. At length I found my clothes and scrambled into them, chattering and blowing prodigiously in the operation. No man—still less woman—knows what haste he can develop in his dressing operations until he has had a below-zero temperature as a pace-maker.

Finding matches I lighted my lamp and sallied forth into the main room. The boards beneath me creaked dismally as my weight came upon them; a drift of snow several feet in length and the shape of a great fish had formed across the room as a result of a crack in the door; the stove was ice cold; the water pails were frozen over; the little clock on the shelf had stopped. My watch was of better mettle and revealed the fact that it was seven-thirty. We had slept well.

I made shavings from a poplar stick in the wood box and soon had a fine fire roaring. When once it was started the great draft of the storm drew it impetuously up the sheet-iron pipes, and I was obliged to apply the damper. No more unhappy irony can befall the homesteader than to burn down his shack in his attempts to warm it.

"Good morning, Frank!" said a voice which set the pumps of my heart going to jig music. I think Jean's voice was really her most wonderful quality; she was enough of the artist to appreciate and cultivate the fine manners of the voice. It had the lilt of singing birds, the limpidity of purling water, the softness of rose-leaves in the twilight, the tinkling of silver bells at dawn, and if I can think of any other figure it had that, too, for me in those old love-hallowed days of mine.

"Good morning, Frank. No word of Jack?"

"No word, Jean."

"He is all right. He is over at Fourteen, and not up yet, I'll wager. Now suppose you go into the men's apartments and face the wall—that fire looks most inviting!"

I did as I was bidden, in part at least, while Jean dressed by the fire. After a little she gave me the "All clear!" and I swept out and seized her in my arms. . . . It was a very wonderful way to begin the day.

"There now," she expostulated at length, "let me get the porridge on. That's more to the purpose."

"Porridge is poor business when there's loving to be done," I argued.

"You won't always think so," she replied as though with some strange glimpse of prophecy, and set busily about preparing breakfast. In these operations she discovered that everything that could freeze had frozen; we had to thaw the bread in the oven, and then to toast it; we melted the butter until it ran over the stove and then we gathered it up and spread it on the toast. We could not afford to be fastidious.

But such a breakfast as it was! The porridge was bubbling hot, rising in little volcanoes which erupted their jets of steam and oat-meal lava into the general aroma of the room; the tea was piping hot; the bacon was sizzling hot; even the toast, so recently frozen, was now hot and filled to the saturation point with hot butter. We ate and drank, and laughed and were happy and cared not a tuppence for all the storms that ever blew!

About mid-forenoon came a sudden smash at the door, and Jack precipitated himself into our presence. He was masked in snow, but his first glance was at me, and I knew by the sudden drawing of his lips the relief it was to see me safe and well.

"I was afraid for you, Frank," he said; "afraid you'd try it."

"I did try it." And then I told him the story of my attempt.

"We have a great deal to be thankful for," Jack said, soberly, when I had finished. "A very great deal indeed."

"Yes, more than you know," I returned, joyously, eager to spread the good news. "Jean has consented to be my wife."

Jack refused to be excited. "Congratulations, old boy," he said, pressing my hand, "but, really, that is hardly a news item. Jean has been—well, on the point of consent for a long, long while."

"Oh, Jack, that isn't fair!"

"Sorry, Sister, perhaps it isn't quite. But you two have been so beastly slow over this business you've tied up the whole progress of events, and now you want me to be surprised about something that's long overdue."

"Well, it's settled now, anyway," said I, "and as soon as you and Marjorie can make up your minds we will fix a date."

"As soon as Marjorie and I can make up our minds!" Jack exclaimed. "Son, our minds were made up months ago. We've been waiting, waiting. At last we concluded that we really must speed things up a little, so it was arranged that Marjorie would send you over here last night, and I would accidentally miss you in the gully and go over to Marjorie's. Of course, we didn't know there was a storm coming. It rather overdid things from a conventional point of view, but fortunately Mrs. Grundy hasn't moved out here yet."

"Why, I never thought of such a thing!" cried Jean, indignantly. "How can you——?"

"Of course you didn't, you old dear," said Jack, drawing her within his arm, "and, I'll bet a wedding present, neither did Frank. And listen, little woman, you're getting one of the best little chums and one of the whitest men between the Red River and the Rockies—and beyond. And as for you, you old son-of-a-gun," punching me in the ribs, "if there are two angels in the world to-day one of them is Jean Lane."

Although the storm still raged daylight now struggled through the wind-swept screen of snow, and there was no great danger in making the short trip from Twenty-two to Fourteen. Jack confessed that Marjorie was uneasy for me so I went home very soon after his arrival.

Marjorie flew into my arms as I opened the door. "I was so frightened, Frank, so frightened!" she whispered, in half sobs. "I didn't know it was going to be such a storm. I was almost sure you'd come back and when you didn't I couldn't help wondering, and every little while through the night I would waken and see you fighting in the snow; fighting, and stumbling, and falling." She wrapped her arms about me and pressed her cheek against my face. "Oh Frank, Frank, it's good to have you here!" she murmured.

I had never known Marjorie to be so demonstrative. She came of solid old Eastern stock that carries its heart a long, long way in. I was not psychologist enough to realize that if ever there was to be a time when Marjorie would be very human she was now entering it.

"There, there," I said, comforting her as best I could. "It's all over now. And listen—I have great news. Jean and I are to be——"

"At last!" she interrupted. "Well, that shows what a little planning will do. You dear old silly, did you suppose——"

"I know all about it—now. Jack confessed. But your little joke nearly cost me my life," and I went on to tell of my battle with the storm, taking care that it should lose nothing in the telling. In this I hope I measured up to the established standard of the typical Westerner.

Marjorie was penitent. "I am so sorry," she said. "I had no idea *that* might happen. Oh, Frank, wouldn't it have been dreadful?"

"It would, but it isn't. On the contrary, it is worth it."

I am tempted to dwell upon the days that followed, but you cannot be interested in our journeyings across the gully now piled deep with snow, nor how it fell about that Jack spent most of his evenings on Fourteen while I spent mine on Twenty-two. This became so much a habit that Jack laughingly remarked that he and I seemed to have traded residence duties, and he hoped it would not come to the ears of the Homestead Inspector!

Spoof drove over one Sunday early in December after an absence of three weeks. The fact was we were beginning to be concerned about Spoof, and had it not been that every fine day—and most of the days were bright and fine, now that the first blizzard of the winter had spent itself,—we could see a blue taper of smoke curling up from the shanty on section Two, Jack or I would before this have gone over to investigate. These little columns of neighbourly smoke were the semaphores by which the community kept itself advised that all was well, or nearly so.

We saw Spoof's oxen breaking trail for an hour or more before they came up to our door. Jack and Jean had also seen them coming, and rushed over to Fourteen to share in extending welcome. It is only among the pioneers that real welcomes occur. Jack swept Spoof into the house, and I turned our own oxen out and put his in the stable.

Spoof's attire in winter, I must tell you, was rather wonderful. He was busily engaged in wearing out a number of grotesque creations bought in London and especially recommended for the Canadian climate. Spoof, now wiser and poorer, mournfully admitted that he had gone to a tailoring firm which advertised as its specialty "Gentlemen's Outfits for the Colonies." There, at a cost of many guineas, he had laden himself with a mass of woolen and fur contraptions which might possibly have been of some value to an Arctic explorer, but which were quite unsuited to latitude fifty, which, by the way, is south of London. Spoof, however, was manfully making the best of it, and as he emerged with some difficulty from his complicated coverings he kept up a running comment of mock appreciation.

"There, you four-guinea leggings," he said at length, "skilfully designed to strangle the circulation and freeze my nether extremities, how joyously would I trade thee for a pair of Canadian felt boots!"

We were soon to learn the cause of Spoof's absence from our threshold for a full three weeks. It seemed that to protect his extensive supply of personal effects Spoof had bought a padlock for his shack, and one frosty morning this padlock fell to the ground. Spoof picked it up, and, wishing to use his hands for some other purpose, thrust the iron link of the lock in his mouth, thinking to hold it there a moment. He had no trouble holding it, but suddenly found to his dismay that he couldn't give it up! The frost in the iron had, with an effect very much like fire, seared his tongue and hung on so tenaciously that when at last he wrenched it out it carried some of the flesh of that tender organ with it.

"I couldn't speak," Spoof explained, in telling of his misfortune, "and there were so many things I needed to say just then."

His predicament had been bad enough. For several days he had been unable to eat. "So I've come over here to make up for it," he added.

After the first outburst over Spoof's arrival had subsided an embarrassing silence yawned across the path of our conversation. There were great things to be said and no one to say them. The girls glanced shyly at each other, and at us, and Jack, by pantomime behind Spoof's back, sought to convey the information that I was elected spokesman. So for lack of preparation I plunged in bodily as one may take a cold dip when he lacks the will power to do it slowly.

"Jack and I have also had a misfortune, of a sort," I said. "We, too, have lost the use of our organs of speech,

permanently."

Spoof narrowed his eyebrows quizzically. "Then my ears make up for it," he said. "I hear you as usual."

"It isn't in effect yet," I explained. "We are to be married at Christmas. Behold the parties of the first part," and I waved a hand at Jean and Marjorie while I turned a phrase of Jake's to good account.

Spoof sprang to his feet. "Oh, by Jove, how wonderful! What lucky dogs! Your pardon, ladies, that my first word was to them; I fear my envy out-weighed my good manners—if I have any left. A bachelor's shack is not exactly a school of polite behavior. It is my visits at Fourteen which have saved me from becoming quite a savage. I—I feel that I should make a speech."

He was as good as his word. Mounting a chair he gave us a bantering dissertation on the joys and perils of married life, to which we listened with much seriousness. But underneath, and running through his words, was something which all his banter did not hide. Spoof was playing the game, but I wondered how many little yellow devils were skewering his heart.

The practical part of it was Spoof's ready offer of his help in arranging details. The problems of securing the services of a minister and buying the marriage licenses demanded attention. Even so ethereal a thing as marriage cannot entirely escape the humdrum of the material, but it was a time when we felt strangely incapacitated for the common-place. We were flying too high for earth worms; larks or eagles were our prey.

Jack suggested that we had thought of driving to the nearest railway station, some thirty miles distant, for the ceremony. We understood that a minister was located there and that the young man who ran the pool room was intrusted with the duty of issuing marriage licenses. He carried a small stock of tobacco as an auxiliary to his pool business and a small stock of jewelry as an auxiliary to his tobacco business and a small stock of wedding licenses as an auxiliary to his jewelry business.

"It would take you two days to make that trip with old Buck and Bright," Spoof protested. "Perhaps more; they're soft with being stall-fed and may quit altogether on the road, and you may not find a convenient armful of hay with which to fix them. Fancy having to send word, 'Wedding postponed on account of the indisposition of Buck and Bright!' No, you must leave all these things to me. You boys are too busy with—much more important business—to be worried about details."

Spoof made his plans joyously. If he was not happy at heart over the fact that Jean was to marry me no one could have read it in his face. He would have a minister, he would have licenses, he would have wedding rings—leave it all to him.

A week later he came puffing across the crusted prairie, not in leggings this time, but in broad-soled Canadian felts.

"Admire my scows," he commanded, as he hove them into view. "Twin schooners of the deep—"

"Travelling in ballast," Jack interrupted.

"Nay, laden with good tidings. Ah, there she breaks out a line of signals," and Spoof started to wig-wag a message which none of us could decipher.

"I fear thee, Ancient Mariner," said Jean, "but what are you driving at?"

"Just this, that the contract is let to one John Locke, minister, the lowest, and, in fact, the only bidder. He will be aided and abetted by an individual called Reddy, for reasons which will be obvious when you see him. Reddy, like Jake, appears to harbor no surname, although no doubt for official purposes he signs something to the marriage license. They will be out by mid-afternoon Christmas Day, and the ceremony will take place in the main drawing room of my country residence on section Two. Carriages at four-thirty. You see, I lost no time in going to town——"

"You to town, with those 'bullocks' of yours!" Jack exclaimed. "And you libelled Buck and Bright by suggesting——"

"I went to town, but not behind my bullocks. There are *some* things I will not do, even for so great a friendship as I bear for thee. I had a driver and a spanking team of mules."

"Mules? Whose?"

"Our American friend, Burke, lent his team and himself for the occasion. The fact is he had misgivings about lending the team without himself, so he came along. He was afraid I would not treat the mules diplomatically. Nothing, I assure you, was, or is, further from my intention. But, my word, such language! Driving bullocks is only a beginner's course compared with the demands made upon a muleteer. . . Burke rose very greatly in my estimation."

So we left the details in Spoof's hands, glad enough to be rid of responsibility for them. There was much to do, and Jack and I found ourselves banished to Twenty-two while the girls made use of the shanty on Fourteen for operations concerning which we were permitted to have nothing but curiosity. Their wedding splendor must, we knew, be designed with such skill as Marjorie and Jean possessed from the best of the clothing they had brought with them from the East. Love may laugh at locksmiths, but it has to bow to dollars and cents—when the trousseau is under consideration. Money, as Marjorie once remarked, may be bad for the heart, but it's good for the appearance. But there was no money to be had for this occasion, and Marjorie and Jean cut their cloth accordingly, literally as well as figuratively.

Also, the news had to be broken to those at home. Each of us wrote a letter, although, to save postage, we enclosed them all in one envelope. There had been little correspondence since we came to the homesteads, mainly because we were as yet thirty miles from a post office, and letters might lie for a month without a chance of delivery. But this was something to be written about. We began with a circumstantial account of our first season on the prairies, and it was not until we had exhausted all other subjects, like a friend seeking a favor, that we got down to the business in hand. Such news as that would be in the old home down by the mill, with Christmas snowdrifts over the fences and the river running softly under its blanket of white!

I recall that there was moonlight just then, and night on the prairie was a base of ivory cupped with an intangible bowl of blue. Always there was the nip of frost in the air, but it was a nip that was not unpleasant, and by no means did it succeed in confining us within doors. During these bright nights Jean and I took long, never-to-be-forgotten walks across the snow-piled, moon-swept plains. I could feel her firm little figure swaying with mine in our strong stride across the wind-packed snow, while our shadows—our shadow, I should say—fell in grotesque caricature by our side. There were moments when we were very, very close to the Infinity which bounded us on every hand, and the wonder of that great, white, silent ocean would surge into our hearts and mingle with the wonder of our love. A quarter of a mile from the shanties and we were as isolated from all living things as if we had been let down in the midst of the Polar Sea, or drawn by some mighty spirit into the farthest void of space. Even the boisterous wind paid attention enough to blur our footprints out behind us and so complete that sense of infinity of isolation. We were so tremendously alone that it seemed the world was full of ourselves and God.

But a gaunt phantom of doubt and uncertainty stalked us even on those moon-lit walks.

CHAPTER XVI.

That gaunt phantom of doubt gradually closed in upon me. I resolved to fight it, but its very intangibility baffled my efforts to throw it off. When I struck, it was not there. When I gripped it, my fingers closed on space. When I challenged Jean's whole-heartedness she burst into tears and asked what proof she could give that she had not given. And it was because she burst into tears that the phantom stalked me all the closer. Had she laughed and called me a silly boy I would have believed her.

Nothing came of it, however, and the days wore on until one forenoon we saw Spoof's tall figure looming up across the snow-waste that lay between Fourteen and Two. As he came up he threw off a miniature cloud of steam in the cold air, reminding me strikingly of Thomson's speech about the steam engine.

"A steam engine," Thomson had declared, "is the most human of all inventions. In fact, it's a mechanical man, or, if you put it the other way, man is a human steam engine. Each of them consumes food and converts it into energy. You feed a man beef, and he gives you power. You feed this engine straw, and it gives you power; the same thing, by a slightly different process."

"Slightly!" exclaimed the farmer for whom we were working at the time. "Slightly! Do you know the difference between the price of beef and the price of straw?"

"Then the engine wins," said Thomson, who would never grant a point in his defense of steam.

For some reason this flitted through my mind as Spoof drew up, trailing behind him a cloud of steam like a comet's tail. Spoof was healthy and strong and his engines were functioning properly.

We made him welcome, but he would not sit down. "Sorry, but I can't stay," he explained. "Jake is in a bit of a mess. Just came over to Two to tell me about it. It seems the cogitation nut on his base burner—you know the big coal stove Jake puts on so many airs about—bless me if I know what a cogitation nut is; rummy old name, don't you think?—but at any rate it has come loose so Jake posted over to borrow a left-hand monkey wrench with which to tighten it. It seems he can't get at it with an ordinary monkey wrench; must have a left-hand one. I hadn't such a thing about the place, and of course I told him so.

"Danged unfortunate," says Jake—excuse the adjective, ladies—and he stuck out his chin and massaged it in a way that showed he was worried more than he admitted.

"It will be all right, won't it?" said I, trying to buck him up, and really knowing nothing about it.

"Well, it may be, and it may not be," said he. "If we're lucky nothing will come of it."

"And in case you're unlucky?" I queried.

"Then the bottom will fall out of the stove and the shack will burn down—maybe before I get back. We can't leave it without a fire in this weather, you know."

"So seeing that old Jake was in a bit of a mess I volunteered to come over and borrow the necessary tools from you. It took quite a weight off his mind, I assure you, for he started off whistling, and shouted to me to give his regards to Sitting Crow."

Jack and Jean, as usual, were with us at the time and from a corner where he was out of the range of Spoof's vision Jack was semaphoring me an improvised hush signal.

"Too bad the day is so dull," Jack said, looking out of our window in the direction of Jake's homestead. "Can't see a thing. His shack may be burned by this time. Perhaps Jake and Bella Donna are already on their way here for shelter."

"Oh, surely not!" exclaimed Jean. "Surely that would not happen!"

"Quite possible," her brother insisted, with the firmness of one who is prepared for the worst. "When the cogitation nut works loose you never know what may happen. And the worst of it is we haven't a left-hand wrench on the place."

"You haven't!" said Spoof, plainly concerned, "I say, that's rather rotten."

"Isn't it? Your best chance is Burke. Burke has quite a lay-out of tools, and, besides, he's an ingenious beggar. No doubt he will be able to fix you up."

Marjorie had already drawn a cup of hot tea, and Spoof drank it while he stood.

"Ah, that's better," said he, as she took the empty cup from his hand. "Wonderful how a cup of tea bucks a fellow up, isn't it? Now I must get along. Fancy old Jake on his back under the stove holding that nut in place with his fingers!"

"Or with Bella Donna's curling tongs," Jack suggested. "Burke will fix you all right," and we waved him away.

It was one of those grey winter days, and he faded out of sight in a few moments. I noticed that Jean's eyes followed Spoof until the mist had engulfed him. Then she turned quickly to Jack and me.

"If there is any danger, don't you think you should go over to Jake's at once?" she said.

"Not a chance," her brother assured her. "But I'd give a dollar to be at Burke's."

"At Burke's? Why?"

"Because, little Miss Innocence, of two facts. First, there is no such thing as a cogitation nut, and second, there is no such thing as a left-hand monkey wrench."

"But Jake came for it—he told Spoof——"

"Exactly. That's why he told him."

For a moment Jean's face was a puzzle as her mind unravelled the mixed threads of Jake's little comedy. But suddenly her eyes blazed with a light such as I had seen in them only once before, and then, as now, it was for Spoof that light had burned.

"So you sent him out on a day like this," she said, speaking slowly and through teeth that were almost closed—"you sent him out on a day like this, across the untracked snow, hunting for something that doesn't exist. He may find something he wasn't sent for."

"Oh, come now, Sister, don't take it too seriously. It is just a joke."

"It will be no joke if Spoof is lost on the prairie," she returned; "no joke for any of us. For example, there will be no marriage in this house, so far as I am concerned, if anything happens to Spoof."

"Isn't that rather mixing the issue?" I said, perhaps a little testily. "Spoof has nothing to do with our marriage."

"No, but *I* have," she answered, with a pointedness that could not be escaped.

"You make a mountain out of a mole-hill," Jack told her, sharply. "One would think it was Spoof you were in love with, instead of Frank."

"If I discuss that at all I will discuss it with Frank, alone," she retorted, with some heat. The color which had fled her face for a moment had come back in a flood, filling her cheeks and forehead, overflowing down her neck and into her hair. If Jean the placid, Jean the mild-mannered, Jean the amiable was lovely, Jean the aroused, Jean the defiant, was adorable. I made that appraisal even while in her eyes I read something akin to my death warrant.

"I was quite serious in what I said, Frank," she continued, after a moment. "If it makes any difference to you perhaps you will follow Spoof. He hasn't the prairie sense that you have; he may be lost by this time. Fortunately there is no ground-drift, and his tracks will show."

"Of course, if you think there is any danger, I'll go," I agreed, eager for a way out of an awkward position, and lacerated at heart by a sense of the breach that had occurred between us. So Jack and I set out to follow Spoof's tracks. We traced him without difficulty to Burke's.

"Has Spoof been here?" we asked our American neighbour when he came to the door.

"Spoof? I should say he has. By this time he's half way to Andy Smith's. Unfortunately I didn't have a left-hand monkey

wrench," said Burke, with a chuckle, "but I reckoned likely Andy Smith would have one, having been a ship builder. Spoof wouldn't stay to eat, but he drank a cup of tea and steamed away."

We explained that we were tracking Spoof in case he became lost, but avoided any reference to the ultimatum that had sent us after him. Declining the invitation of Burke and his wife to stay and eat, we pushed on.

About half way to Andy Smith's we met Spoof coming back. Andy had not seen the joke when it was first presented, and in his analysis of it had revealed it to Spoof as soon as he recognized it himself. This was fortunate for Spoof, as otherwise he would doubtless have been sent to Ole Hansen's in continuation of his quest. As Spoof came up to us his face twisted in a broad grin.

"Did you get a left-hand wrench?" we asked.

"No, but I found out what a cogitation nut is. This is it," and he tapped his head with his knuckles, "only it doesn't cogitate very well."

The three of us linked arms, Spoof in the middle, and trudged back toward Burke's.

"Mighty decent of you to come after me," said Spoof, at length.

"Yes, wasn't it?" we agreed.

Lucy Burke would take no refusal this time, so Spoof and Jack and I stayed for dinner. I had a feeling that this was bad generalship, and that we should be hurrying home, where Jean was doubtless waiting with growing concern. I managed to mention my forebodings to Jack.

"Don't you believe it," he whispered back. "When a woman reads you the Riot Act go out and have a riot. Nothing makes her so unhappy as to suspect that her husband is having a good time when she thinks he should be doing penance over her displeasure."

I had no opportunity to mention that I wasn't Jean's husband, and that the furthest thing from my wish was to make her unhappy, and that I wondered where Jack got all his information, for Lucy Burke was plying us with fried pork and baked beans and browned potatoes and home-made bread and butter and coffee that would float an egg. After dinner Burke, with the loneliness of a homesteader to whom the visit of a neighbour is something of an event, detained us as long as possible, on one pretext or another, and finally, when we insisted upon going, hitched up the mules and drove us back to Fourteen.

It was dark by this time and the lamps were lighted. I noticed that lamps were set so that their yellow wedges of light thrust out into the darkness from each of our windows. Jean was at the door with the sound of our sleigh bells, and as I passed close by her I scrutinized her face for some hopeful sign. It was a blank wall.

We made Spoof and Burke stay for supper, and no one had more fun over the day's events than had Spoof. Jean kept her indignation well bridled, and we were a happy party, outwardly, at any rate. Spoof and Burke made it up that they would drive to Jake's late that night, when he would be sure to be in bed, and stuff his stove-pipe with a sack as a slight exchange of compliments. During the evening Jean's eyes avoided mine but I had an uncomfortable feeling that three of us were on a precipice which afforded room for only two, and that I was the third.

As the evening wore on Spoof insisted that Jean get out the banjo. I could see that she was in no mood for music, but she played her part well, and as their voices joined in "Old Black Joe" and "Silver Threads Among the Gold" I could not help wondering if she were as unhappy as I was.

After they had sung for a while Spoof took the banjo from Jean and swept his lean, long hand with quick, delicate master-strokes across its strings. Under his spell our little homestead shack faded out in the blur of Spoof's tobacco smoke, and presently I saw a little boy and girl sitting on the bank of a river, digging their toes in the warm sand and watching the spray of misty diamonds from the water-wheel across the stream.

"Spooky old machine, a banjo, isn't it?" I heard Spoof say at length, and of a sudden I was back on Fourteen, and in the midst of a world which had its share of troubles. "Has an uncanny way of ripping up the past; tombstones, skeletons, everything." Then, to an improvised accompaniment, he began reciting Kipling's poem to the banjo.

"It was this poem," he explained, in the midst of his recital, "that caused me to bring a banjo to Canada. Otherwise I should probably have shipped a piano, to the enrichment of the transportation people and my own further financial undoing. I must drop R. K. a line of appreciation."

"Still, the piano case would have come handy," Jack suggested. "You might have put your house in it in bad weather."

"Almost," said Spoof. But he was back to his theme again, and the wooden wall against which I leaned trembled in sympathy with his strings.

". . . I have told the naked stars the Grief of Man.
Let the trumpet snare the foeman to the proof—
I have known defeat and mocked it as we ran.
My bray ye may not alter or mistake
When I stand to jeer the fatted Soul of Things,
But the song of Lost Endeavor that I make
Is it hidden in the twangings of the strings?"

After that silence fell upon us, and before long Spoof and Burke left on their errand of reprisal. Jean elected to go home soon afterwards, and I accompanied her to Twenty-two. She stood a moment with the door latch in her hand, as though debating with herself whether she should send me home.

"You had better come in," she said at length. "There are some things we should talk about."

I closed the door behind me and Jean lighted a lamp and removed her wraps. "Come and sit down," she said, making room for me beside her on a bench.

I sat down beside her, and would have kissed her, but she drew gently away. "Please don't, Frank," she said, and when her eyes met mine I saw a look in them as of some wild thing wounded to the death.

"Jean!" I exclaimed. "Have I hurt you so?"

"No, Frank, not you. But I am hurt—hurt," and she pressed her hands about her bosom as though in physical pain. "It is so hard to know—to be sure—what is right!"

"How what is right?"

"In books—you will understand, Frank—it is always so clear. One is a hero; the other is a villain; it is so easy to know. But in life—I don't suppose there are so many villains after all. That doesn't make it any easier to decide."

"I'm afraid I don't quite follow you, Jean."

"I suppose you don't, and I shrink from making it more clear to you. Do you know what "The Song of Lost Endeavor" means? Have you sung it—in your heart?"

Her voice had dropped almost to a whisper, and her arm, apparently of its own volition, had found its way to my neck.

"I don't know that I do," I admitted, "except in a vague way. I suppose it has to do with failure, with knowing one's self to be a failure——"

"That's it—and I know. . . . I have tried, and failed."

"Jean!"

"I thought our promise—my promise—would bind me. . . . It didn't. It won't. It can't." She withdrew her arm, then quickly seized both my hands in hers.

"Oh, my boy, my friend, my chum!" she exclaimed, and little crystal wells gathered between her eyelids as she spoke. "How can I hurt you so! But nothing else would be honest. I have tried and failed. I lost my temper with you to-day, and once before, over Spoof. You were playing jokes on him—making him the butt of your humor—your idea of humor——"

"I promise you nothing of that kind will ever happen again, dear; I promise it, I swear it!"

"But that doesn't help, any. Don't you see, it's not that I care—so much—about the joke—on anybody—but because *I love Spoof*!"

I hope I took the blow like a gentleman. I had the advantage of being somewhat prepared for it.

"I suspected that," I said at length. "I don't want to stand in the way of your happiness."

Then I fell from the heroic with a thud. "Oh, Jean, Jean," I pleaded, "why do you turn to Spoof, whom you hardly know, and away from me? Have I fallen so far short—an I so little to be desired—that you should love a stranger in preference?"

She pressed her hand against my lips. "Don't, please. . . . I can't explain. Ask me why the wind blows—why the flowers turn to the sunlight—I can't explain. I would ever so much rather it had been you."

"Then make it me! It is in your hands——"

"No, it is not. I can't change it. I have tried—and failed. Of course, I could marry you still, but you would not want me with a reservation in my heart. You would despise me if I married you like that."

Beneath the numbing shock of the fact that Jean was slipping—had slipped—out of my life, I was conscious that her words were true. I should not have wanted her—with a reservation. And so we sat in silence and in suffering, with no sound about us except the ticking of the clock and the thumping of our own hearts, until at length Jean arose to rebuild the fire. I took it as my cue to leave.

"Well, what is to be done about it?" I said, trying to speak in a matter-of-fact way, although I could not keep the tremble out of my voice. "We must clear up the situation some way."

"Yes. We will explain, so far as it can be explained, to Jack and Marjorie. We must not interfere with their marriage or their happiness. And Spoof must not know."

"Spoof not know! How shall we prevent——"

"I mean he must not know why—why our marriage is post—is off. Don't you see, Frank; Spoof must not know—I love him." She whispered the last words and turned her head away, as though ashamed of her confession.

"Not know you love him! Do you mean that Spoof doesn't know you love him?"

"No, he doesn't, Frank."

"And he has not made love to you?"

"Not a word."

I stood pondering that fact. If Spoof, without trying, could win Jean in competition with me, who had been trying my hardest, and who had the advantage of all the intimacies of childhood, what would happen when he set himself to the business of wooing? That he would do so as soon as he knew the coast was clear I did not doubt for a moment.

"I think I understand, Jean," I said, as I turned toward the door. "This happiness is not for me—it was too much to be expected. I had dreams—dreams that are not going to be realized, ever. I had pictures, but they must be torn out of my life. . . . I hope you will be happy. Goodbye."

"Oh, Frank, don't go like that!" she cried, her arms outstretched toward me. But I had no heart to prolong my torture in her presence. I closed the door behind me and went stumbling through the drifts toward Fourteen.

CHAPTER XVII.

Breaking the news to Jack and Marjorie was no easy task, but we got through it some way. Jack and his sister had an unhappy hour over it, but Jean was adamant in her decision. There was to be no marriage, so far as she was concerned. It was out of the question.

"You are passing up as decent a chap as ever lived," Jack told her, "on a chance of Spoof, and you don't know that he even cares for you. Perhaps Spoof's affections are already fixed. Have you thought of that?"

"Thought of it! I've lain awake nights, with burning eyes, and thought of it. But what can I do? I can't ask him."

"You could marry Frank, like a sensible girl."

"I only wish I could. But it is out of the question."

And with that the matter had to stand. Jean doubled her energies in helping Marjorie prepare for the great event, and while she tried always to greet me with a smile I more than once surprised a tear stealing unbidden down her cheek. I reflected that if I was suffering, Jean was suffering, too, but there was no comfort in that. I didn't want Jean to suffer. And why she should wring her heart over me, and yet refuse to marry me, was a twist in her nature beyond my power of comprehension.

Spoof took the news with genuine or well-feigned surprise. We merely explained that the wedding was not to be a double one after all; that Jean and I had reconsidered matters, but Jack and Marjorie would be married as arranged.

"I say, I'm sorry to hear that—I mean about you and Jean. I presume it is only a postponement?" But we gave him no answer to that question, and Spoof, of course, did not press it.

Christmas day dawned bright and cold, with a whip of north-west wind and a skiff of loose snow sifting across the frozen prairies. I found myself lying awake in the morning, thinking of Jean, and of all I had hoped that day would mean to me. This was the dream that was gone; the picture I had had to tear out of my heart, only it would not stay gone; it plagued me in my sleep, it haunted me in every silent moment of the day. That Jean should be so strong, so set, so immovable, and, as it seemed to me, so unreasonable, in spite of all her delicate wistfulness and strange uncommonness of spirit—that was a side of Jean's character which all the years of our childhood and youth had not revealed to me. . . . I had not re-opened my suit. I had accepted her decision. But the old picture would come back, and this Christmas morning as it swam before my eyes it stirred within me an immeasurable poignancy of spirit.

"Merry Christmas!" shouted Marjorie, poking her head into my room. Marjorie was going through a time of strangely mixed emotions. Her heart was light on her own account and heavy on mine, and in these days she found the bridge between laughter and tears an extremely narrow one. Perhaps it was for that reason that her shout of "Merry Christmas!" ended in something like a sob, and, with a little rush, she plunged on to my bed and threw her arms about me; she wrapped them around my neck and shoulders and drew my face to hers. And as her cheek lay against mine a little warm trickle of moisture wended its way down, upon, and across my lips, and I felt her frame tremble as it rested near me.

"Not crying, Marjorie; not crying, on this of all mornings!" I exclaimed, although my own throat was full. "Not crying, dear—on my account?"

To that question she snuggled closer, and after a little I heard her whispering in my ear. "It will come all right in time, Brother mine," she said; "all right in time. I can't think—I can't believe—anything else. Don't you feel—don't you know—that it will?" And so to soothe her, and that her greatest day might not be spoiled, I said I knew it would come all right in time, but there was a stone between my lungs and a band of iron about my chest.

Marjorie kissed me on the lips, then raised her face and dried her eyes. Suddenly she sprang to her feet, and I could not but admit how very good she was to look upon. Her dark hair hung loose about her shoulders; she allowed herself no curl-paper nonsense, and indeed no device could have added to the beauty of her waving locks. She was still in her night dress, although she had drawn on something warm about her feet, and, like the good wife she was always to be, she had started the fire—a duty which I admitted properly fell to the man of the house. Perhaps it is because a man *should* start the fire that he so greatly enjoys having his wife do it. I could hear the poplar sticks crackling as I lay watching her through moist and dreamy eyes. She was good to look upon; so different from Jean, but still so good!

"Hustle up, Frank," she cried, with a sudden return to her normal manner. "We have a lot to do to-day."

It was not until after our midday meal that I went over to Twenty-two. Jean was in her room, but I mustered the spirit to chaff Jack with such a mingling of good wishes and humorous sallies as my brain could command, and we finished the whole with an impromptu sparring match in the middle of the kitchen floor.

"Watch your beak, old Sitting Crow!" I commanded, "or I'll send you to the minister with a busted mug," and I swung on him with enthusiasm. But Jack was handy with his fists, and something thumped in my eye like a piledriver.

"Aha!" said he. "The first of the wedding decorations. Let's make it a pair."

But at that moment Jean came out, looking so radiantly sorrowful, if one can look that way, that the glory of Marjorie seemed as the glory of one of the lesser planets against the sun. She came to me with an outstretched hand.

"Merry Christmas, Frank," she said, looking me squarely in the face. "Why, what has happened to your eye?"

"I was just practising," said Jack, "and I want to exhibit this specimen of my handiwork to Marjorie before we are married. It is as well that she should understand——"

But Jean was gone in quest of butter, with which she rubbed my swelling eye, and the caress of her fingers was worth the punch it had cost.

It was now time to hitch the oxen to the rough sleigh or jumper which Jack and I had built. Into this the four of us could with some difficulty be packed, and as we reckoned it would take at least an hour for Buck and Bright to break trail to Spoof's, we loaded up and started on our journey at a little before two. Spoof had insisted that the ceremony should take place at his house, if for no other reason that there might be a honeymoon trip as far as from Two to Fourteen, and the minister was expected at three.

As the snow-clad prairie crept by to the leisurely plodding of Buck and Bright the mound which marked Spoof's house and stable gradually defined itself against the bright grey background of the December afternoon. Spoof had been on the look-out, and while our oxen were still puffing and blowing at a considerable distance from the shack we saw him coming over the drifts with his great, rapid, English stride. He was beside us in a few minutes, his wind-tanned face wreathed in smiles, his white teeth gleaming under a short, sandy mustache to which of late he had been giving some encouragement.

"Merry Christmas!" he cried. "The merriest ever—ever!" He held out both arms, and we all shook hands at once, and I suspect that the bride-elect pressed a chaste kiss upon his cheek. But Jack, as lawful owner, could afford to be generous. Jean took no such liberty. That would have been different.

The inside of Spoof's shack was always an example of orderly overcrowding. It was full of useless furniture, inappropriate clothing, fire-arms, saddles and bridles, cartridge belts, smoker's equipment, tobacco tins, photographs, magazines, and an endless assortment of miscellaneous knicknacks, all carefully placed and tended. Even when Spoof occupied it alone it was something of a mystery where he found space for himself in the midst of his possessions. But now Jean and Marjorie and Jack and I were crowded in as well, only to find a number of others already there.

Our eyes had not yet become accustomed to the semi-twilight of the interior when a familiar voice saluted us. "Merry Christmas, Sittin' Crow, an' ev'rybody," it said. "Didn't I warn you'se what 'ud happen?"

It was Jake. He was sitting perched like a toad on the wood-box where he could expectorate with convenience into the ashpan of the stove. "We dragged him into the centre of the floor and in the melee that followed Jake lost his footing and at least three of us were precipitated with him.

"Oh, save my husband, save my husband!" cried Bella Donna, in mock alarm, while Spoof gravely remarked that perhaps the cogitation nut had come loose.

"I am the minister," said a straight, clean-looking young man, when the uproar over Jake had subsided. "My name is Locke. This is our good friend Reddy; pardon me, by the way, Reddy, what—what is your real name? I should know it for introduction purposes."

"I left it down East," said the individual addressed as Reddy, a slight, boyish looking figure with a shock of caroty hair.

"Well, Reddy it is, then," said the minister, and we shook hands all around. "Reddy is an important personage in our town," Mr. Locke continued. "In a sense he is my chief competitor. He runs the village pool room, and, I am afraid, draws bigger crowds than I do Wednesday nights, and perhaps on Sundays, too—behind the blinds."

"Not guilty," pleaded Reddy. "There are no blinds on the shop."

You may not know that the chief social institution in the young prairie town is the pool room. It is the club house of the village and the community. It is usually a long, crude building of plain boards, unpainted inside or out, and equipped in its central part with a huge coal stove and three or four pool tables. The main entrance is in the centre of one end, and on one side of the entrance is a barber's chair, a tall mirror, and a shelf of razors, mugs, and clippers; on the opposite side of the entrance is a show case filled with tobacco in its various forms, with perhaps some boxes of candy and a slot machine where those of a sporting temperament may endeavor to "beat the house" for cigars. The fact that these attempts almost invariably end in failure does not seem to diminish their popularity. Into these pool rooms come the farmers to have their hair cut, or to enjoy the luxury of a bought shave, or to while away an hour while the horses rest in the livery barn, or because it is not late enough or too late to start for home. Here come the townspeople; the blacksmith and the bank manager, the storekeeper and the grain buyer, the cattle dealer and the machine agent, to spend a lazy evening or a stormy afternoon and perhaps make the acquaintance of a possible customer. Here the commercial and social affairs of the community are discussed, and, to a large extent, settled. Here, too, such tit-bits of scandal as even the smallest village can afford are told and re-told, and lose nothing in the telling.

"I believe," said the minister, generously, "that Reddy's competition is of a very honorable kind, and his presence here to-day is proof of his bigness of heart. As it was not convenient for his customers to come to him, he has come to his customers. He brings with him, I believe, a small tray of plain gold bands and a blank marriage license or two. I prevailed upon him to bring two or three extra licenses; it is always well to be prepared for emergencies."

I looked at Spoof and found him looking at me, and then I looked at Jean and found her looking at the floor, and a faint flush of color slowly spread about her face. The flat reception of the minister's pleasantries was relieved by Jake, who declared in favor of a total embargo on the marriage license business.

"At least it should take as long to get married as to prove up on a homestead," Jake remarked, "an' most fellows have a lucid interval once in three years."

"Humph!" said Bella Donna. "I bet you haven't had one in thirty."

"Looks like it, I admit," her husband retorted slyly.

When the formalities about the license were completed the minister had Jack and Marjorie stand together in the centre of the shack, and spoke the few simple words that made them man and wife under the law. We paid them the usual hackneyed compliments, and then stood around looking rather sheepish and wondering what to do next, until Reddy produced a box of chocolates and presented it to the bride. It was a simple thing, but in some way it loosed our tongues, and presently we were all laughing and wishing each other Merry Christmas.

By this time the sun had set on the short December day, and night was drawing her grey curtains across the plains. I paid for the license on Jack's behalf and gave the change to the minister, and we were about to thank Spoof and say good-bye to the little company when they announced in concert that they were coming over to Fourteen. In vain we protested that the roads were bad, that the night was settling down, that the sky looked like a storm. All these perfectly good reasons why they should stay at home were converted into arguments why they should come. Spoof, as host, yoked up the oxen and insisted that he would drive the bridal party; our jumper would carry five as well as four. "It was built for two," he argued, "so one more will make no difference."

Finding that there was nothing else for it we accepted the inevitable and crowded in. Spoof provided rice, with which we all were liberally pelted; Jake fired two shots from a gun, and with much shouting at Buck and Bright and the world in general away we went at a pace of almost three miles an hour, dragging behind a chain of Spoof's discarded boots and overshoes.

When we were well under way our attention was suddenly arrested by a commotion in the rear. It was Jake with the "flying ants", and with Bella Donna and the minister and Reddy in his cutter. He was standing up, waving the loose ends of the reins about his head, and imprecating his horses into a gallop. In a moment he was upon us.

"Out o' the way, you old married people," he shouted. "I don' blame you fer goin' slow, but don' hold up the percession."

But Spoof had no intention that the bride and groom should surrender the place of honor. With many strange adjectives he goaded the oxen, and presently noted a slight acceleration in their movements. "We're making nearly four knots an hour," he shouted.

"That's nothing," the minister shouted back. "I made a knot in less than ten minutes."

But for all of Spoof's urging our oxen plodded stolidly along the wintry trail, now barely distinguishable from the grey whiteness of the plains. Flakes of snow were falling, and on every side the pall of night surrounded us, drawing its circle closer and closer. The trail was firm, but the surrounding snow was loose and deep, and to pass us Jake would have to plunge his horses through it, at considerable risk of upsetting his cutter. The old land guide, however, hesitated not a moment for such a consideration as that. Swinging his horses from the trail he cut out at them with his whip, and they rushed by us, throwing a snowy spray like a torpedo boat passing a liner.

But as it is so often the occasion that makes the man, so now was it the occasion that proved Spoof's resourcefulness. Climbing over the dashboard of the jumper he ran along the tongue and threw himself upon Buck's ample back, which immediately began to heave and gyrate with an entirely new motion. Whether it was as a protest against the liberty which Spoof had taken, or whether it was that the legs about his sides brought back memories of youthful days when some bare-legged urchin on a Manitoba farm rode him in wild triumph through the pasture field of the parental herd, matters not; the fact is that Buck presently broke into a most unprecedented gallop, and his mate, willy-nilly, followed suit. They were just in time to prevent Jake's party getting on the trail ahead of us, and in great glee we careered by them.

"Forced draught!" shouted Spoof. "Fourteen knots!"

But our triumph was short lived. Unaccustomed to such speed, the oxen presently began to wobble in their course and suddenly floundered off the trail.

"Hard a-port, hard a-port!" Spoof shouted. But he was too late, or his directions were misunderstood. Over went the jumper, flinging its freshly married and other contents into the snow. The speed of the oxen wrenched the tongue from the wreck, and they continued homeward in greater haste than before.

Spoof jumped free and barely escaped a defiant flourish of Buck's heels as they flipped by him. Ruefully he gazed upon the wreckage.

"I told the bally bullocks to swing hard a-port," he explained, "and instead of that they slithered off to starboard."

By this time Jake and his party were again beside us. "I hope no one is hurt," said the minister, as he took Jean's free arm to help her out of a drift. It seems that in some way I had become entangled in the other. "A rather rough start on the sea of matrimony, Mrs. Lane, I am afraid," he added to Marjorie, who was shaking the snow out of her hair.

No one was hurt, as snow is very useful for falling into, but Jake had to give up his cutter. We piled into it, taking Mrs. Jake along, with me driving and Spoof and Jake and Reddy and the minister following on foot as a sort of bodyguard, albeit a most undisciplined one if we could judge by the recriminations that were hurled about the unfortunate Englishman's head. On various occasions, looking back, I could see a flourish of arms and blows exchanged and someone down in the snow, and roars of laughter rolled up after us through the wintry night.

At last the shack on Fourteen came into view, and, to our great surprise, a light shone from the window. When we came up close we saw a number of jumpers and bob-sleighs about, and the tracks of many feet in the snow.

CHAPTER XVIII.

The scene inside was an animated and amazing one. In the principal room a table had been built and now groaned beneath a load such as I had not thought the country-side could supply. It was covered with snowy linen, and an assortment of chinaware of several varieties of pattern threw back the yellow glint of two great oil lamps, one of which I recognized as having recently decorated a shelf in a corner of Spoof's shack on section Two. I had just time to catch a glimpse of a frosted wedding-cake in the centre of the table and a steaming turkey at one end when Jean brought me out of my trance.

"Isn't it wonderful, Frank—wonderful!—to think of it, and all of them so poor! Why, even, there's Mr. Sneezi!"

It was true. The whole community was present. They had swarmed to our premises in our absence, bringing the necessities of the wedding dinner with them, and now they were lined up around the walls, guilty-faced but delighted. There was Brown, whom we had first found wrestling with the architecture of a sod stable; there was Mrs. Brown, dimpled and smiling, dreaming of far-off English Yule-log and mistletoe, and making her dreams come true on the wind-swept plains of Canada; there were the three little Browns, washed and on their good behavior. There was Andy Smith, the ship builder from Glasgow, now learning the drift of stone-boats and prairie schooners, and puffing on his short clay pipe the while. There was Ole Hansen and Olga, his wife, and tucked into the recesses of my room I discerned the outlines of fair-haired, tow-headed children—doubtless six in all. And there, sure enough, was our good friend Sneezi, and beside him Sneezi's wife, both trying to look very proper and at ease, and failing rather sadly, except when a broad Russian grin sent their more forbidding aspects scampering for cover.

Mrs. Sneezi's bright yellow shawl lent a dash of color to the company. The Sneezi juniors had been left at home, where, snuggled in their warm dug-out, they doubtless speculated proudly and somewhat wonderingly upon their parents' *debut* into English-speaking society. And there, too, across the table was the American, Burke, tall, lean and lantern-jawed, his weather-beaten cheeks still revealing a suggestion of the olive hues of a more southern latitude, his thin lips parted over well-set teeth in a smile of friendly amusement. Nearby was his busy wife, Lucy, short and active and with possibilities of plumpness to compensate her for the ravages of time. They were a wonderful company, typical foundation stones of a nation; foundation work the quality of which shall be tested through all the years to come.

I said the whole community was present, but I was wrong. Mrs. Alton and the little boy, Jerry, were not there. I mentioned their absence to Spoof when I had an opportunity.

"They must not have known about it," was his explanation. But Spoof had evidently been at pains to make sure that all the others in the district should know. Why had he omitted Mrs. Alton? It was one more tangle in the puzzle of Spoof's peculiar attitude toward the widow on Eighteen.

As you may believe, our little house, with its groaning table and all these husky neighbours, was very, very full; when Jean and Marjorie and Jack and I and the minister and Reddy and Jake and Bella Donna and Spoof were added we were packed like city people in a six-o'clock street car. It was with difficulty we found elbow room to get out of our wraps, and then there were laughing and hand-shaking and congratulations all round.

"What happened the oxen?" Burke asked, when the general buzz permitted the question. "They came a-roarin' round here like a range stampede a few minutes ago, trailin' a sleigh-tongue all unravelled like a Christmas tree. I put 'em in the barn."

"You shouldn't have done that," I protested. "Their place is outside when company comes."

"Couldn't make 'em believe it," said Burke. "They were set on goin' in, and most obstrep'rous about bein' unyoked. I turned Ole's bucks out for the sake o' peace."

"Yaw, dat was right," Ole assented. "Ay tank by Yimminy when folks get married nothing's too good for nobody." Ole's references were somewhat obscure but his good intentions could have been read a mile away.

"But what *did* happen?" Burke persisted. "We were just goin' to organize a search party."

"It was all the fault of the bally bullocks," Spoof explained. "I told them to hard a-port and they slithered to starboard, and over we went."

"Ah'm affeared the skipper should lose his papers," said Andy Smith, dryly. "He's no a safe mon on sich a sea."

"That sea is nothing to the one our friends here have just shipped on," Spoof rejoined. "As for losing my papers; that's a fact, I did. My cigarette papers. Who's got a helping?"

So the banter continued until Mrs. Burke reminded us that "the turk" was cooling off and began seating us about the table,—as far as it went. Someone had thoughtfully brought boards to build a table and seats, and as many as could sat down. The others were served standing.

When we were settled Mr. Locke arose and asked a blessing. I don't exactly remember his words, but I do remember the reverent hush that swept over our little throng, and the wonderful dynamic quality of the man which lifted us in an instant from the commonplace into the infinite. He gave thanks for the food before us; then asked a blessing upon the principals in the day's events. Might their lives be prosperous and fruitful; might they be useful and glad in all their days; might they enter the crimson glow of life's Indian Summer with the same high purpose and romantic love as crowned them in the yellow dawning at the thresholds of their career. And might the little community now gathered in neighbourly kindness about our table thrive and prosper and bring forth food for the sustenance of the world and souls for the Kingdom.

The serious words sobered us for a minute, but it was only a minute. The stimulus of turkey with cranberry sauce and scalloped potatoes and boiled turnips and creamed carrots would have stirred to gaiety hearts much heavier than ours, and it soon developed into a noisy and frolicsome meal. The turkey was an enormous bird; the attack of all our hungry party left the skeleton not entirely stripped. I remember that one of the little Hansens, venturing up like Oliver Twist with a demand for more, was soundly rapped on his yellow head by a drumstick in the heavy hand of Ole, but the children as a whole were well behaved, allowing for the example set them by their elders. Then we had plum pudding and sauce and apple pie and cheese, and nuts and candy for everybody. Jean and I mentally ricocheted between amazement at the generosity of the meal and speculation as to whence it had come. No one ever told us the secret, but we did learn that Spoof had a fat cheque from England just before Christmas, and that Mrs. Burke's cooking of turkey and apple pie was the talk of Humboldt county in Iowa, and that Mrs. Brown positively refused first place to anyone when it came to making plum pudding, and so we formed our own conclusions.

After the meal the table was knocked to pieces and carried out so that there might be more room, and as the bridal couple stood about wondering what was to happen next they suddenly found themselves the objects of a number of presentations. Mrs. Brown made hers first; six wonderful pieces of Limoges china, hand painted by the squire's daughter herself, and presented to Mrs. B. on her departure for Canada.

"The dear miss—she were a good soul, if I say it—said as 'ow she 'ad read in a book that they drank tea in Canada, just like *real* people and may be these would be useful as well as hornamental, but love me, dearies, I need the room more. I suppose I should 'ardly give 'em away, but if the squire's daughter never comes a-visiting me I'll 'ave to borrow 'em back." Her lips were smiling as she made this little speech, but a tell-tale splash fell on one of the pieces as she handed it over.

"Our present is outside, and I'm a-goin' to bring it in," said Burke, putting on his cap and coat.

"Oh, I wouldn't bring it in, Tom," his wife suggested. "Let them see it out there."

But Burke was bound to do it in style. "In it comes," he insisted, and plunged into the night. In a few minutes he returned with a heavy sack of his back, which he set in the middle of the floor. Again and again he made the trip until five sacks were in the pile.

"Ten bushels of seed wheat," he exclaimed proudly, "and may every kernel yield a hundred-fold!"

"Pretty good speech, Tom," said his wife. "I was sure you'd forget it."

"Forget nothin'!" Tom retorted. "I made that up, right off the bat."

"You'll be Member of Parliament some day, with a gift like that," Jack prophesied.

"Fer the constitooency of Sittin' Crow," Jake added, maliciously, but the point of his shaft was lost on the audience.

"Weel, Ah'm thinkin' Ah'll be next," remarked the placid Andy Smith, tapping his clay pipe and returning it to his pocket.

From somewhere he produced a kit of steel-worker's tools; wonderful pieces of British workmanship, they were. I believe Jack still carries some of them in the back seat of his automobile.

"No as much as Ah could o' wisht," said Andy, modestly, "but richt guid in the makin', and they'll come gey handy when you buy that threshing-mill for the neighbourhood."

Just then we observed the color mantling to the tawny hair of Ole Hansen.

"Ay tank by Yimminy Ay mak myself maybe a yoke (joke)," the tall Swede confessed. "Ay say to Olga, 'By dam, Olga, what you tank, Ay tak a load o' hay?' She say, 'Ole, you get more fool all the time. Hay for a marriaging! What you tank dey are, oxes?' Den Ay say, 'Well, den, w'at else?' an' she say, 'Dere ain't nodding else,' an' den Ay say 'Dah hay gets it', an' so it does."

"I hope you're not going to bring it in, too," said Lucy Burke.

"Yah!" said Ole, opening his mouth in a great circular orifice and laughing silently while his head rocked in inward appreciation of Mrs. Burke's joke. "Ay tank she make good bedding, but not to-night. Ay pitch 'im off beside dah barn."

We found it was true. Ole, having nothing to bring but a load of hay, in the fullness of his heart brought that.

But an even more striking token of that community spirit which was the salvation of those early days was now to be presented. Sneezit had slipped out while the hay was under discussion and now came thundering in, his broad back bearing a whole dressed carcass of pig. Sneezit did not trust his English to make any remarks, but he smiled broadly under his bristly mustache. . . . But what I saw was a dug-out full of children, with eyes peering through the gloom, and little, wistful, silent mouths.

"Now it's my turn," said Spoof, but Jake interrupted.

"As it happened, I was down in Regina on business connected with my estate when news o' this approachin' tie-up on Fourteen reached me, by means of a note from Spoof," Jake explained. "At first I couldn't make head or hinder of it, it was so bad wrote. So I took it to a young fellow I know with lots o' learnin'; got to know him on account o' the int'rest he usta take in the people on Twenty-two; he found out I located youse boys an' girls and usta come roun' pretty reg'lar askin' questions casual-like, an' I says to him, 'How many shirts does a fellow get on this laundry ticket?' Well, he read it over slow to himself, an' then he jus' sits lookin' at nothin' till I begun to think maybe there was some bad langwidge such as he couldn't repeat in my presence. An' after awhile he says, 'Jake, jus' another mirage; you know, those phenom'na'—that's what he called it—on the prairie that makes you think things is what they ain't. Let's go down town,' he says, an' on the way he tells me what's in the ticket. Well, I thought he was leadin' for a bar, which is the best place I know of to raise a new mirage when your old one goes bust, but danged if he don' head me into a jewelry store. And there he buys this."

Jake delved into a pocket and brought out a little gold pendant, a chaste and delicate example of the goldsmith's art. He held it for a moment to the admiring gaze of all present before resuming his narrative.

"Give that,' my friend says, 'with my good wishes an' a touch o' my regrets, to the young lady on Twenty-two, with the compliments o' Sergeant Brook,' he-says," and so Jake placed the little golden trinket in Jean's hands. . . . It was a difficult situation. Jean's first impulse was to hand it back.

"Better accept it," I whispered to her. "The fewer explanations the better."

"But it—it's a wedding present," she remonstrated. "How can I . . . ?"

"Keep it until you need it," I suggested. Jean was very lovely in the heightened color of her embarrassment, and as her hand fell by my side I seized it surreptitiously in my own.

"Oh, Jean, why not make it to-night?" I whispered, mad with her beauty and her nearness.

"It's quite impossible," she answered, but she did not immediately withdraw her hand. She left me marvelling more and more over the tantalizing complexity of her attitude toward me.

Fortunately, the interest of those about us had been quickly rearrested by Jake. "Havin' a little weakness o' my own," Jake was continuing, "although I never said nothin' about it, not wishing to take advantage o' my young friend, Sittin'

Crow, or to start a scene with Bella Donna, I bought its mate fer the lady on Fourteen." And with this little speech he placed another pendant in the hands of Marjorie.

"When I came to Canada to farm," said Spoof, after the excitement over Jake's gift had died down, "I came equipped for everything but farming. I could have started a second-hand store, a curiosity shop, an arsenal, or a music hall much better than I could start a farm. In fact, I feel like all of these things, except, perhaps, the music hall, when I look around my shack. Particularly well was I equipped against savages, grizzly bears, and mountain lions. I remember the days I spent in picking out my rifles, weighing the qualities of this arm and that, and the penetrating power of the different bullets. My biggest game so far has been a badger, *alias* a chinook, whose hide now adorns the den of my immediate and admiring ancestor. Out of the abundance of my defences I now bring to you, John Lane, this piece of artillery, with the injunction that it must never be pointed toward section Two, and, preferably, not at anything else. Hang it over your portal, as evidence that you can be a desperate man upon occasion, and let it go at that. I have been thoughtful enough not to bring any ammunition." Spoof then produced, out of the bedroom where Brown, acting as his agent, had secretly cached it, a repeating rifle, which Jack handled with as much admiration as Marjorie spent on her pendant, and then placed it lovingly away.

"Now, I believe that's all," said Spoof.

"Not yet," Reddy interrupted. "I want to be in on this, although I didn't come prepared." He had written something in a note-book, which he now tore out and handed to Jack. It was a receipt for the price of his wedding ring. Jack protested, but Reddy would have it no other way.

The only one not represented by a presentation was the minister, but he proved equal to the occasion.

"My children," he said,—he was not much older than Jack or I, perhaps about the age of Spoof—"I am not a man of the world, and consequently cannot give you of the good things which the world provides. The theory that a minister should lay up his treasure in Heaven is taken rather literally in these times. I am not quarreling with that. Materialism is the murderous outlaw of the age, an enemy that goes bullying through the land, outraging our finer natures, overturning our ideals, polluting our ambitions. I hope I am not envious of his followers. And to you, and all of you, I give something that money could not buy—my blessing, with a promise of my ministrations, without charge, on those future occasions upon which it may be assumed you will be in need of them."

The minister had escaped from a somewhat embarrassing position with the dignity that became his calling, and with a gentle joke that showed how very human he was at heart.

"Clear out the pork and the seed wheat," Spoof ordered, as there seemed likely to be a lull in the night's enjoyment. "Ole, it is fortunate that Mrs. Burke persuaded you not to bring in your load of hay."

So the floor was cleared. The door, when opened, revealed a wedge of snow-storm whistling by, but inside the wintry weather was forgotten and the tremor of our shanty's timbers passed unnoticed. Reddy had mounted himself on our own table—the big one had been taken out, in pieces—and was twisting the strings of a violin to tune. Presently his bow cut loose a drone of dancing rhythm, and feet began to tap the plain pine boards of the floor.

"Pardners all!" Jake commanded. It was evident he was to be master of ceremonies; he had just taken a great chew of tobacco to promote the flow of language. The insistent note of the violin brought Jack and me, with Marjorie and Jean, Mr. and Mrs. Burke, and Mr. and Mrs. Brown, to the centre of the room. The dancing would be of the "square-dance" variety which was no novelty to us or to the Burkes, and which the others would soon pick up under the guidance of Professer Jake.

"S'lute yer pardner! . . . Pass 'er by. . . Balance to the next." And we were off. Jake and the fiddler warmed up with the dancers, and presently the shanty was rocking with the stamp and the swing of it. Those were not the days of dancing that is little more than a walk; one danced with all his heart and body, and was not afraid to shake the floors and ceilings.

The end of the set found us perspiring and happy.

And so the evening wore on. Ole and Olga joined the dancers in the third set, and thereafter never left the floor; Andy Smith ventured into Marjorie's arms, and in five minutes was feeling younger than in the days of his apprenticeship on the Clyde; Spoof danced with Jean as much as seemed necessary. When Spoof was not monopolizing her, Burke or

Brown or Smith was. But at length she spurned us all in order that she might win Mr. Sneezit to the floor. The Russian hesitated, fearing to appear foolish, but he would have been more or less than human if he could have resisted Jean's enticements, and presently she was leading him through the simple movements of a cotillion.

Then it was that the minister distinguished himself. He had kept aloof from the dancing, but now, seeing Mrs. Sneezit being left somewhat out of the party, his Christianity overcame his creed and, sweeping down upon her, he seized her in his strong arms and had her upon her feet before she knew it. Her protestations were of no avail; she must dance with him and dance she did. The music and the kindness and the humanity of it all seemed to penetrate her stolid heart, and Mrs. Sneezit—she of the brood with the peering eyes and the wistful, hungry mouths—was won by the magic of fiddle and foot back into the gay days of girlhood and danced as though the world were hers.

At length they went. The flurries of snow had driven by; the moon poured its silver radiance on a world of downy ivory, and the bigger stars blinked stolidly from a steel-blue heaven as our guests bundled themselves into jumpers and sleighs and took their departure. Their cries of good wishes and good luck were wafted back to us above the crunching of the snow. We watched them until they faded out of sight in the white moonlight.

Soon after Jack and Marjorie and Jean crossed the snow-filled valley to their over-crowded house, and left me to one that was over-empty. For a long time I stood looking into the stove, with lid and lifter in my hand, in the act of putting on more wood. The glow of the coals went grey as I watched, and, for the first time in my life, I measured the depth to which the plummet of loneliness can plunge. . . .

CHAPTER XIX.

The gulf of loneliness into which I fell on the night of Marjorie's marriage was but the shallow waters of an ocean of despair in which I floundered through the dreary days that followed. I now had occasion to realize that loneliness is not a matter of space or distances, of the many or of the few, but a matter of one's adjustment toward his surroundings. In all the months of my life on Fourteen the devils of loneliness had never wormed into my vitals; my hours had been as full of companionship as though I had shared them with the throngs of some great city. I had not found the prairies lonely; I had wasted no sighs on the horizon that met the sky as far as the eye could bridge; I had been filled and content with the life that lay about me.

Now, all was changed. I had given Jean up, under protest, as the only thing to do. But having made my protest I meant to accept my fate with dignity; I would take my sentence like a man, and serve it without whining. In my fortitude I would, perhaps, present to Jean a more heroic picture than in the days of my seeming success; my bearing as a rejected suitor would have in it a touch of nobility—stern nobility, if you like—for which there was little place in the character of an accepted and happy lover. And because women love the heroic my demeanor might reveal to Jean golden threads spun through my temperament which otherwise she would not have perceived, until at last she would turn to me with "Frank, I did not realize how much a man you are! Let us start over again—at the beginning."

I flattered myself with all this nonsense about the fine figure I would cut, but that was before Marjorie had crossed to Twenty-two and my house had been left to me desolate; utterly desolate. As the grey light of the late morning of that first day after Christmas filtered through the frosted window-panes, slowly revealing the outlines of the table and the stove and the other pieces of my rude furniture, I began to realize how utterly empty and barren the wretched place was. While Marjorie had been there she had given it a soul, and Jean, dropping in every day, had added a quality that was even more than soul; it had in it something that was spiritual, that was celestial, that was divine. But now soul and spirit were gone and I was left amid the damp, drab clay.

I had been long in going to sleep, and as a consequence had awakened late. The shack was bitterly cold; the only comfort lay under my heavy blankets. As the light increased I counted the knobs of frost that had formed on the ends of the nails that came through the roof. I had never noticed that so many nails had missed the rafters. We were rather bad carpenters. My mind leapt back to the time when we built the shack, clearing all the events crowded between, as the vision leaps from height to height across great valleys in the prairies. How unreal and far away it all seemed! But another leap carried me to the bank of a river, and little children playing in the sand, and a slow-pacing water wheel that sprayed its mist of diamonds in the sunshine. I saw her little calico dress, her little brown bare feet, the ringlets of yellow hair hung about her cheeks. That was Jean. . . .

The clock had stopped! It was with terrific suddenness that I realized the clock had stopped and in my barren shanty was the silence of the tomb. Its round, glassy face grinned an imbecile grin at me from its place on a shelf on the wall. Its hands showed a quarter to four. . . . Well, there was nothing very mysterious about that. In the excitement of the wedding party I had merely forgotten to wind the clock. Only an overwrought nervous system could discern anything uncanny in that. I reasoned all this out, with absurd deliberation, as I rubbed my eyes and wondered why the clock had stopped. Or perhaps the frost had stopped it.

My watch had fared better, and when I drew it from my pocket on the corner of the bed the friendly bustle of its ticking was reassuring to my ear. I could hear the companionable canter of its balance wheel galloping down the road of life by my side. "Next to a dog," I said to myself, "a watch is the best friend a man can have."

That set me thinking about dogs, and I wondered why in all these months I had neglected to provide myself with a dog. As a sort of insurance, I grimly reflected. One always can fall back on a dog.

The hands of the watch said half-past eight, and I suddenly remembered there were cattle to feed. It would be a decent thing to get up and do all the chores that morning, if they were not already done. So I drew my underwear from beneath my pillow, where I had learned to tuck it in cold weather, and sprang from the friendly shelter of the blankets. One needs no incentive to quick dressing in a temperature only a few points above zero. I was fully clothed in less time than a city man, in his steam-heated flat, takes to decide whether his collar really demands changing.

I hurriedly started a fire; watched it until it had a proper draft; turned the damper in the pipe to guard against its getting

beyond control after I left it. Then, after drawing on my pea-jacket, cap and mitts, I set out for the stables. The morning was grey, with a scattered sifting of small snowflakes, but the nip to the air was not nearly so uncomfortable as it seemed when contemplated from under the warm blankets. I reflected that comfort and happiness are largely a matter of the point of view. But that doesn't help much when the bottom has fallen out of your particular universe.

Buck and Bright were bawling before they heard my hand on the stable door. An ox with an empty stomach has an uncanny ear for the food purveyor. A half-inch fuzz of new untrodden snow was good evidence that Jack was keeping hours even worse than mine. As I opened the door the oxen turned their big, reproving eyes upon me, while even the cow tossed her head from side to side in peevish protest.

"It's all right, old chaps," I assured them. "Blessed is he whose wants are few and easily satisfied," as I threw them each a forkful of hay. They made a great attack upon it, tossing it with their noses and their horns in an atavistic appreciation of the good old days when their ancestors roamed the range and were never tied by the neck to a manger and left to starve while their masters married. Our cow was at present enjoying her annual holidays, so there was no milking to be done, and my morning chores were soon finished. Our pigs—we had two pigs now—saluted me after the manner of their kind until I choked their squeals with a dole of barley chop. Not even a pig can squeal through a mouthful of dry barley chop.

While I was engaged in these operations the hens ran about my feet until one happened to get tramped on. Her squawking reminded me that there might be eggs, and search discovered two, fresh laid that morning. That was a glint of sunshine through the gloom. I gathered them up and turned it over in my mind for a moment whether I should take them to Jack and Marjorie. But then that would leave Jean without. There would be noses out of joint on Twenty-two soon enough, without provoking an issue. In the interests of peace I decided to eat them myself.

I resisted a desire to go to Jack's door and announce that the morning chores were done because I knew that at the bottom of that desire was a hope that I should see and speak with Jean. One may be tied to a stake but that is no reason why he should poke his feet needlessly in the fire.

The stove lids were red hot and the kettle was belching forth a small geyser of steam when I got back to the shack. My search for remnants from the feast of the night before was astonishingly fruitless, until I remembered that the young Hansens had been turned loose upon the left-overs. So I cooked a mixture of oatmeal and water, which I called porridge, boiled the two fresh eggs, thawed out part of a loaf of bread, melted a piece of butter, and sat down to a meal that was hardly calculated to make me rejoice in my single blessedness.

After breakfast I washed my few dishes, swept the floor, made my bed, and generally set the house in order. Even then it was only ten o'clock, with nothing more to do until noon. At noon there would be a repetition of the routine, and then nothing to do until night. At night there would be supper and the evening chores, and nothing more to do until morning. And the next day the same, and the same, and the same.

Nature may be a wise designer, but she has an uncanny way of overdoing a good thing. I thought of the thousand miles of timber we had passed through on our way west, timber without end! All the world seemed filled with trees, standing, fallen, piled in heaps in jagged water-courses; dead and dying through leagues of swamp and muskeg; towering over the highlands in an evergreen silhouette against the sky. What a wonderful place for a few miles of prairie; say for every second section of prairie, like the railway lands in the West! Then came the prairies—a hundred treeless miles at a stretch; sky and grass without limit, a horizon broken only by a settler's shack at great intervals, into the farther West where even the settler's shack failed from view, and one was alone with God and the world. Here was a land where the very posts to mark our checker-board survey had to be shipped in from untold distances. What a wonderful place for a few square miles of forest! And yet they tell us Nature is wise.

And so it was in our labor; from spring till freeze-up we had scarcely time to shave. Every hour of sunshine—and no country gives its sunshine more lavishly—was money to the settler, and the settler's life from April to November was a torrent of high-geared energy. I had been too busy even to make love properly to Jean, and when it has been said that a young man is too busy for that all other figures of speech fail. Perhaps that was why my love-making, indifferently done, taking second place to plowing and sowing, reaping and threshing, had ended so disasterously. And now, only a month or two later, the one thing in the world of which I had too much was time. Now I could afford to make love like an artist—but I had no canvas to splash on!

It is wonderful how much philosophizing one can accomplish between washing the porridge pot and peeling the potatoes when there is nothing else to be done. Just as the long summer evenings of this great West are already giving the world a race of athletes, so must the long, sombre winter days and nights, with their limitless opportunities for reflection and introspection, breed for the world a new brand of thinking, uncramped by convention and untamed by precedent. That is, if the "advantages" of city life do not crowd in so rapidly that they relieve us of the necessity of thinking.

It was mid-afternoon when Jack burst in upon me. "Well, old Robinson Crusoe, how goes solitude?" he demanded.

"Rotten," said I, "but I can always change my mind if I want to."

"Aha!" he exclaimed, in return, clasping himself about the middle. "A blow in the fifth rib! A subtle blow under the fifth rib!"

Jack was obviously in great spirits, but with a sudden soberness he sat down beside me, and I felt his hand on my knee. "It's not quite the thing, old chap," he said, "to cut us dead, just because we're married—that is, some of us."

"I haven't cut you," I retorted. "Give me time."

"I know it's a raw deal for you," he went on, disregarding my interruption, "and I'd give—I'd give—half of my happiness, if you like, if I could put it right. It's a little embarrassing for us all. But don't you think Jean is worth a fight—a little more fight than you have made?"

"I understand English," I said, "particularly Jean's English. If she wants me now she'll have to say so."

"Oh, get off your high horse. He's a lame nag, anyway! Jean thinks she loves Spoof, but she doesn't. She's just infatuated with him. She'll grow out of that. But you might help her along a little."

"I'm not so sure. Spoof's a pretty decent chap," I said, inwardly giving myself credit for amazing magnanimity.

"Of course he is," Jack agreed, somewhat too readily, as it seemed to me. "But that has nothing to do with it. Jean isn't putting you and Spoof under the magnifying glass, so to speak, and studying out which is the more decent chap. It isn't done that way. And to save her life she couldn't tell you why, to-day, she thinks she loves Spoof, and why, to-morrow, she will know she loves you. Reason doesn't enter into these things at all."

"That doesn't make it any easier for me."

"Maybe not," Jack admitted. "And, as I have argued that reason doesn't enter into the consideration, I suppose it is of no use to reason about it. Then let us get on to ground you can understand. Come on over for supper."

I accepted with more alacrity than might be expected of a young man who was resolved that although tied to the stake he would not thrust his feet in the fire. Marjorie kissed me when I went in,—a kiss for her dear old bachelor brother, she said, obviously in fun, but I think there was a pang of deep sisterly sympathy underneath. Jean was calm, poised, self-controlled; her eyes seemed larger than usual, and the white of them showed that clear blue tinge that is found in some kinds of delicate china. Either the lamp light was peculiarly yellow or Jean's complexion was below the mark. She chatted freely, almost too freely, and laughed upon occasion, but there was no ring in her laughter.

Altogether, it was rather a difficult evening. We played cards after supper, and tried, as so many others have done, to forget our troubles in the chance of a lucky hand. Even the cards were against me. Jean and I had always played together, but to-night Jack insisted that it was not meet that a man should have his wife for a partner at cards, so our combination was broken. I may have had a subconscious and disturbing feeling that Jean's hand, to my left, would have made better holding than anything I could hope to draw from the deck. At any rate I played abominably and went home early.

And so the days dragged on. I kept a corner of my south window rubbed clear of frost so that I might maintain a look-out for a visit from Spoof, for although he was my rival, or because he was my rival, I felt that I had with Spoof something very much in common. But Spoof seemed suddenly to have discontinued his visits to Fourteen and Twenty-two, and for the first time in that winter the trail to his shack was entirely over-blown and obliterated in a waste of snow.

Jack came over every day, and Marjorie and Jean came two or three times a week and gave my shack the womanly touches of which it was beginning to stand in need, but Jean never came alone. I began to understand that the prairies give solitude without privacy; if one seeks privacy he goes to the city for it.

In this way a couple of weeks had passed when one evening it occurred to me that I could kill a dull hour or two, and discharge a somewhat neglected filial duty, by writing a letter to my father. Investigation proved, what I greatly suspected, that I had no writing paper, so I went over to Jack's to borrow some. They had none either, but Jack produced an old account book with some blank sheets in it, which we decided would do quite well. In those days we weren't particular about stationery.

Jean was in her room while I was there, and did not come out, so in a few minutes I returned to Fourteen. There I set the lamp on the table and spread the old account book out before me. It once had been owned by Jack's father; the first pages were filled with items which apparently had to do with the purchase of the Lane farm, and with Mr. Lane's services in the woolen mill. I glanced over them with casual interest and as I did so a loose slip fell from the pages. I picked it up from the floor and found a number of lines in Jean's handwriting:

When through the livelong day I sigh
And ponder on my sad estate,
I would my Nemesis defy
And burst the bounding cords of Fate.

Now would I tear each bond away,
Now would I risk your sad reproof;
Come, let us live and love who may:
Come to me . . . Spoof.

"So it has come to that," I said to myself. "Love-sick doggerel!" I crushed the sheet of paper in my hand in a rage, even while a hot flush of color ran up my face at the realization of the fact that I had read something never intended for my eyes—for *my* eyes least of all. So she could tear the bonds away; she could risk his "sad reproof"; she could do anything but find words to fill out the feet of the last line. "Come to me . . . Spoof!" With a sudden stabbing at my heart the question interrogated me, Could Jean be ingenious enough to use those dots, after the manner of our modern writers, to suggest something which she shrank from saying in plain English? Here will I use some of them myself . . .

CHAPTER XX.

I resolved to have it out with Jean. There was no sense in letting things go on like this. Jean had happiness within her grasp, for the taking, but she persisted in writing moon-struck doggerel to a man who apparently cared no more for her than for the post that marked the corner of his section. Spoof's continued and deliberate neglect—I called it neglect now—admitted no other explanation.

I spent a wakeful night thinking about this, and toward morning I got up and retrieved the crumpled bit of paper which I had thrown into a corner of the kitchen. I spread it out and read the lines again. A night of reflexion had worn the edge from my indignation, and I admitted that, from an artistic point of view, the verses were perhaps not so hopeless as I had thought them. Indeed, they suggested a certain germ of poetic ability. A little devil of conscience began an insurrection in my sense of fair play, demanding to know if I could write as well myself. But I am no poet. I took a pencil and put down the word Jean, and then set about hunting for rhymes for it, but I could think of only two—"lean" and "bean." Neither of these seemed to lend itself to poetic treatment.

Suddenly a whiff of memory rushing in from somewhere sent me scuttling among old school books at the bottom of my trunk. It was a whim of mine to keep my old school books, if only that in after years I might read and appreciate the little gems of literature which, with the assistance of a phlegmatic teacher, I cordially hated when a child. Here it was—an old Ontario Reader with a sensational story about an Indian woman who killed a bear with a butcher knife, or some such weapon. My sympathy, I remember, had always been with the bear, doubtless because of the picture which was made to represent the Indian woman. I had read this story again and again, when all other passages in the book had failed to interest me, and some little long-forgotten cell of memory said I would find a fragment of paper tucked between these pages. Sure enough, there it was! I drew it out eagerly, but tenderly and almost reverently, and held it under the lamp. How that strange, childish scrawl seemed to run all over my heart and pucker it into little gasping pockets! I could feel a thumping between my lungs and the hard beating of my pulse went throbbing through the paper in my fingers.

When I am old
And very tall
I hope my name
Will be Mrs. Hall.

A mist came up out of the past and blurred the scrawly letters until they swam before my eyes and faded out of sight. They had carried me back to the dear dead days of childhood—that Eden of life which comes before the disillusionment which is the Fall. The years between had gone out with a gulp that filled my throat, and again we were little children playing together, solemnly mating ourselves for the future under the witnessing murmur of the great pine. That had been one of the great days in my life, and I had not known it then. I wonder how often we know the great day when it is actually upon us! But in that day I had drunk in something which had become part of my system; part of my flesh and bone and brain; part of my hope, my aspiration, my life. And now would I give it up? Never—never! I pressed the previous missive to my lips and suddenly the dam of my overwrought nerves gave way, and tears rushed down upon me. With a man's shame I would have checked them if I could, but the flood would not be stopped—and there was none to see. I fell on my bed and let the storm sweep over me.

After a while came calmness, and with that calmness the resolution which I recorded in the opening lines of this chapter. I would have it out with Jean. I would put up another fight for all that made life worth the living. I would *not* accept my fate; at least, I would not accept the fate to which Jean had resigned me. She would see! . . .

But this was a battle which could not be fought in public, and I racked my wits for some way in which I might lay siege to Jean—alone. I hardly could ask Jack and Marjorie to get out of their own house while I subjected Jean to the main drive which was to break down her resistance; much less could I invite Jean to Fourteen for the same purpose. The prairies, with all their vast spaces, refused me just that one little niche of privacy I needed. As I turned the matter over in my mind a clever plan unfolded itself before me. I would make a sled and invite Jean to go coasting somewhere along the banks of the gully. Then we would wander on and on, the farther the better.

Fortunately some boards remained of the table which had supported the wedding feast, and I went to work with a will. The reaction from inactivity was in itself a tonic to my spirits, and I found myself whistling an improvised tune which I fitted to the words, "When I am old and very tall, etc." Hope rebounded, as hope will, from its dip into despair, and I

began to picture the shack on Fourteen as it would be under the loving care of "Mrs. Hall," and the joy that we would find in its seclusion. The winter months, which had been dragging so unutterably, suddenly threatened to be all too short.

I completed my sleigh and presented myself at the door of Twenty-two. Jack looked upon the vehicle with evident misgiving. I may have built it rather stoutly, but that was no reason why he should suggest that I hitch an ox to it.

"An ox!" I retorted. "This is built for speed. I am going to ask Jean to go coasting."

"Aha!" said Jack, significantly. "I wish you all possible—speed."

Jean showed no reluctance about going. She drew on a woolen sweater and a short, cloth winter coat, with a collar of some fluffy kind of fur which had originally grown on a cat. She had a little fur cap of the same material, which she pulled down snugly on her head, and we were off.

We followed the crest of the gully for some distance in the direction of Sneezi's farm, ostensibly in search of a good coasting spot, but actually much engaged with our thoughts and the real purpose of our outing. That Jean understood it perfectly I was convinced, and under such circumstances the fact that she had so readily accepted my invitation was at least a hopeful omen.

Walking on the untracked snow in midwinter is an uncertain business, and the prairie people rarely make use of snowshoes. For the most part there was a frozen crust that bore our weight, but this crust has an unfortunate habit of giving way at unexpected moments, particularly when one has just taken a big stride forward. There is an effect very much like coming upon the head of the stairs in the darkness when you think you are still safely walking along the hall. It precipitates one forward with great suddenness, but fortunately snow is a good thing to fall in. We scrambled to our feet, laughing and in high spirits. It was a wonderful thing to laugh again, and mean it.

At last we found a place where the snow had curved in a great white plume over the bank of the gully. For fifty or sixty feet it dropped away in an absolutely smooth descent; then came a sudden pitch, as though a great ladle had scooped out the drift; then a succession of little billows whipped up by the cross currents at the foot of the hill.

"How's that?" I demanded.

"It looks good," said Jean. "Let me see if it is firm."

With that she ran out upon the drift, her dainty feet tripping down it like a bird. But the descent was steeper than she thought; her momentum over-balanced her, and in an instant I saw her careering wildly down the slope, her arms outstretched, her hair flying loose from under the rim of her cap. Near the foot she disappeared entirely.

Perhaps I should have rushed after her, but I didn't. I sat down leisurely at the top of the hill and waited for her to reappear. Presently a mitten hand came up over the crest which hid her from view; then something round and furry, like a sleeping kitten; then a forehead, two eyes, and a glimpse of cheeks.

"Aren't you coming down—to help me?" she called.

Now I had meant to stand on my rights; to tell Jean that she had gone down the hill on her own accord, and might come back in the same way; perhaps to poke some quiet mirth at her efforts to scramble up the slippery drift. When a man contemplates matrimony he may as well settle at once who's who, and why. Now was my time to be firm.

"No, I'm not coming," I said.

Jean looked at me for a moment, in surprise; then uttered not another word. But from her hand she drew her woolen mitten, and raised her fine, firm fingers in the air. One of those fingers crooked, with the knuckle bent toward me, and the finger pointing to her face; then, with a little seductive flicker, she beckoned me to her. It was too much. I sprang on my sled and shot like an arrow to its target.

When we climbed the hill together she was radiant. "Isn't it wonderful, wonderful!" she exclaimed. "All this white wilderness to play in, to shout in—Listen!" And she helloed at the top of her voice. Only an echo, beating back from the banks of the gully, answered. "See, we are all alone—alone in all the world. Why didn't you bring me out here before?"

"Are you glad to be alone with me, Jean?" I asked, drawing the unmitten hand into mine. "Are you glad to be here,

alone, with me?"

"Why, yes. You are my friend."

"Only your friend?"

"Oh, see, there's a place where perhaps we can slide right over the pitch! Let's!"

She was on the sled in an instant, and I behind her. I kicked it loose. With a gentle crunching sound the runners started scraping through the snow; then, as the speed increased, the sound rose to a whine which mingled with the rush of air in our ears and the spray of snow in our faces. Jean's heels were just above the snow surface, and when, as happened once or twice, they dropped too low, they showered us with flying icy crystals. Then, just at the dip, one heel drove in much too deep—too deep to be accidental—the sled trembled, turned sideways, and went over.

We disentangled ourselves, laughing, but we did not immediately reclimb the hill. I found a sheltered spot in the pitch where we might sit on the sled with our backs to the great drift while our faces caught the slanting warmth of the sun and our eyes could range the field of tiny rainbow signals thrown up from the ripple at our feet.

Jean broke up the crusted snow with the heel of her overshoe; then buried her feet in the powdery mound. Presently a toe came wiggling up through it.

"Jean, don't!" I cried. "You take me back to those old days! We understood everything then; then everything was supposed to be settled."

The toe settled to stillness in its burrowing; Jean's sensitive lips, too, settled to a stillness firm and sad.

"Tell me, Jean," I pressed at length; "why can't we go back; why can't we start over again—like that?"

"We have always been good friends," she murmured.

"Good friends—yes. Must it stop at that?"

"And neighbours," she continued. "We have always been good neighbours. Perhaps that is the trouble."

"How—the trouble?"

"Well, it's like this," she said, and again the toe began to gyrate in the snow. "We've known each other so well, and so long, there isn't anything—much—left to know, is there? Could you stand the boredom of a person who has no new thoughts, no strange ideas, no whims—nothing that you haven't already seen and known a hundred times?"

"There never could be boredom with you, dear. Just to have you with me, to feast on you, to know you were mine, would be enough for me."

"For about a week. You'd soon tire of a feast with no flavor to it. I would, at any rate. . . . Oh, I see it working out already. I don't want to gossip, and Jack and Marjorie have been everything they could to me, but already I can see them settling down to the routine—*the deadly routine*. Bad enough anywhere, but on these prairies, with their isolation, their immensity—unbearable. I couldn't stand it."

I studied her for a moment in silence. Jean might know all about me; I might have no new thoughts, new ideas, new whims, but it was quite plain I didn't know all about her.

"Still, there are many couples on these prairies living happily, I suppose," I ventured.

"You suppose," she repeated. "That's right. It is just supposition. Nobody knows; that is, the public doesn't know. But what is their happiness? An ox-like acceptance of the routine. Breakfast, work; dinner, work; supper, work; sleep; breakfast—the whole circle over again. I couldn't stand it, Frank; there's no use pretending I could. I'd—I'd run away with some one!"

"Jean!"

"Yes, I know what you're thinking. But it would break the routine, anyway; it wouldn't be that way I would lose my soul;

perhaps that way I might save it."

"You're a strange girl, Jean."

"Yes? After all these years? I am so glad. As long as I am strange you will be interested in me. That's the trouble with you; you're not strange. I know all about you. And I wouldn't be your housekeeper for life for the sake of being your lover for a week."

"Jean!"

"Shocking, isn't it? But true. Don't you know that's what happens, nearly always? It must happen, unless there are new points of interest always arising. I have the misfortune to think, and so I see these things in advance, and try to shield you from them."

"The misfortune to think?"

"Of course. Otherwise I could accept the ox-routine and grind out my soul in the treadmill of three meals a day. I suppose that's what people call morality—ideal wife and mother, etc. I'd run away from it all."

I, too, punched the snow with my heel. "I never heard you talk like that, Jean," I said at length. "I didn't think you thought—along those lines. You wouldn't excuse people who run—who disregard their marriage vows?"

"The first of which is to love," she shot back. "When that fails, all fails. Why make a mockery of it?"

"But I would love you, always—always. You would be to me the only—the only *possible* girl in the world!"

Slowly she turned her face toward me; she had been giving me an opportunity for profile study during this dialogue. Her eyes found mine; her lips—in them again I saw the rose-leaf beauty of her childhood. When she spoke her voice was low and tremulous and musical.

"You dear boy! You think so. I only wish it were true!"

The last words came with a catch in her breath, I thrust forward and clasped her hands in mine.

"You mean that? Oh, Jean, if you do. . . ."

"Yes, I mean it. That is the great difficulty. It isn't true. You wouldn't love me always. I wouldn't always be the only girl."

"Jean, you would. I swear it!"

"Then I must reverse it. I wouldn't love you always. You wouldn't always be the only man in the world."

My spirit, which had gone pounding upward, fell like a burst balloon.

"Why?" I demanded.

"Because your vision is too small. Because it is bounded by the corner posts of Fourteen. Because I couldn't live penned up in such a—a pasture."

"You'd be breaking out—toward section Two."

"Frank!" It was her turn to exclaim.

"Yes, toward section Two. You've done some plain talking, Jean; now it's my turn. It is Spoof that has upset your mind—put all these wild notions in your head. It is Spoof that you are thinking about, not me. I suppose you think you could marry him and not drop into the routine; you would be less an ox, as you put it, on Two than on Fourteen. Perhaps that would be best, after all. Perhaps if you were fenced in on Two, you might break out toward Fourteen!"

"Frank! Please don't be unkind—and unfair. I *am* thinking about Spoof, and it is just because he is *not* bounded by section Two. You and Jack and Jake think he's a greenhorn, and you play your silly little tricks on him, but his world is the world, and yours is Fourteen, and Jack's is Twenty-two, and Jake's is—whatever his section is. He's so big, so

big!"

"I see. Spoof has travelled more than we have. He has seen more of the world. He has met more people. And so he is big! I bet I grow more oats to the acre than he does—you should see his plowing; looks like—"be guess and be damned,' as Jake says."

"Quite an elegant remark; suitable to Jake, hardly to be expected from you. And your argument would be irresistible—if I were an ox."

"You're sharp, aren't you? Well, something to eat is not to be despised, even by BIG people, like you and Spoof. Even the soul, which you are afraid of losing on Fourteen, will pick up and leave you on Two, unless you feed that body in which it lives. That's what the soul itself thinks about people who don't hustle for a living; it gets up and leaves them."

"Good for you!" cried Jean, "You are actually thinking. I have goaded you into it. Now—where are we?"

"We're at Spoof. You say you could love me for a week, and him forever."

"I didn't say that."

"You as much as said it. Spoof may have advantages—I admit his travel, and all that—but will those things keep him big? Won't section Two bound him in a year or so, just as you say Fourteen bounds me now? Is he different clay; less ox, more soul?"

"Section Two can never hold Spoof, because he—because he is *big*, don't you see? He reads, he thinks, he sings, he dreams. No section can hold one who does those things."

"Does he write poetry?" I inquired, innocently.

"I—I don't think so," said she, not scenting my trap, "but he is very fond of it. You should hear him read——"

"Hear him read 'Come to me. . . . Spoof!'"

She turned to me fairly again. She had withdrawn her hands from mine and was crushing little crusts of snow between her mittens. Now she dropped the snow, shook her hands free of its powdery residue, then linked them about her knee. For a long moment she held me under her eyes without blinking.

"So you saw that, did you?"

"Jean—I'm sorry. I apologize. I saw it by accident—I couldn't help that. I could have helped speaking about it. I apologize."

Then her eyes dropped. "It was very foolish," she murmured. "You have a right to be amused."

"But I'm not amused," I protested. "And I'm not sure it is really foolish. At any rate, I'll confess something, Jean; when I found it I tried to write a poem—to you—but I couldn't. The only rhymes I could think of were Jean and bean."

"Splendid! Oh. Frank, I'm beginning to be afraid—to hope—that I didn't quite know you after all. Fancy you trying to write poetry—and about me! Let's write a verse now. I'll help you."

She whipped a mitten from her hand and sat with her fingers lightly drumming on her lips, summoning the muse.

"You'll have to write it," I said. "I'll sign it."

"All right!" she exclaimed at length, and turning to the huge drift behind us she traced on its hard surface with her forefinger this inscription:

If you will only be my wife,
No matter what the past has been
I'll take a broader view of life
And try to keep you guessing, Jean.

"Oh, you used my rhymes!" I exclaimed. "But isn't that last line slangy?" I said, when we had it well laughed over and I had added at the side an idealistic sketch of Jean's face under a bridal veil. My drawing rather lost its point in the fact that I had to explain what it was.

"No, not slang—poetic license. That's a great advantage poets have; anything that isn't quite good English can always be called poetic license. Now sign it."

I signed it in bold, printed letters, and then we fell into silence.

"What's the answer, Jean?" I said at length.

"Oh, Frank, I can't give you an answer—not now. That may have been slang, about keeping me guessing, but it goes a long way down in one's nature. If you would only read, and study, and think, and learn to appreciate beautiful things—"

"Oh, Jean, I do! I appreciate you."

"Rather clever, Frank, but that isn't just what I mean. I mean like Spoof; we might as well be frank about it. I've seen him watch the sunset in the pond; watch the colors change and blend and run in little ripples with a touch of breeze as though the water had been stirred with a feather; I've seen him sit for hours watching the ambers and saffrons and champagnes of the prairie sunset, and——"

"And that's why he got so little plowing done."

"Stop it! And he knows every flower on the prairies, and all you know is pigweed and——"

"And tiger lilies."

"Stop it again! And he takes note of little things, like when I worked a new strip of lace into the yoke of my dress, and when I put a dash of scarlet ribbon in my hat he said it gave me just the touch of color that one needed on the prairies, and it was no wonder that the Red Indians loved color, and how much wiser, in some things, they were than we, and——"

"He was spoofing you, Jean."

"He wasn't."

"Then he was making love to you."

"Perhaps. But it was very nice. You never noticed my lace or my ribbon. You didn't even notice this new cap I have on to-day; I made it out of an old muff, all myself, and I just said to myself, 'I wonder if Frank will notice it,' but you didn't——"

"I did, too. I saw it first thing, and I thought how nice it looked on you."

"Spoof would have said how nice I looked under it."

"Oh, damn Spoof!"

"Spoof's an artist, Frank. You're not."

"Nor yet a poet. But I reckon I'll make a good farmer."

"We threshed out the ox question a while ago. Let's keep on new ground."

"Very well. Here's some new ground. When did Spoof tell you all these things? I understood he hadn't come into the house all the time we were away."

"He didn't either—hardly. But he used to come over regularly to see that everything was all right about the place and to have his 'bawth', and he had the handsomest bathing suit—white and yellow trimmings—and Marjorie and I fixed up bathing suits too, and we used to go in——"

"Together?"

"Of course. Only Marjorie only went in once or twice; she said she was afraid of the frogs. . . . Marjorie is a knowing girl."

"My own sister! And she would conspire" I crunched a clump of crust viciously under my heel.

"Well, seeing that you have confessed, I suppose I should own up, too," I said, after a silence. "I never told you that there was a girl out where I worked this summer."

"No? What was she like?" Jean's voice was steady, but I caught a new note in it. It augured well for my first attempt at romancing.

"Oh, she was a nice girl, all right. Her folks thought she would make a good ox, but she didn't quite fall in line. She had that broader vision you set so much on. Sort o' hinted that she and I might do well running a rooming house at Moose Jaw; they say things are humming at the Jaw. Rather suggested——"

"Oh, Frank, she never did! Wanted you to marry her, I suppose?"

"No, she didn't just say that. But she's BIG, you know; takes a big view of things. Of course, it might have come to that in time. I remember one afternoon it rained and we couldn't work in the fields and that night she and I went to a dance——"

"Does she dance well?"

"Oh, quite well. And free. You know—nothing standoffish, or anything like that. Well, the storm came up again during the night, and we couldn't get home, and it was only a small farm house so some of us had to sleep in the hayloft, and Nellie said she'd be a dead game sport——"

"Now Frank, don't tell me any more. I don't believe it. What happened next?"

"Oh, nothing much. It was about noon when we got home, and the old man was pretty sore, but I told him I thought a good deal of Nellie and wouldn't mind marrying her if it came to that, and I asked her to come over here and visit us next summer——"

"You're lying, Frank. Let's go home."

As we walked home in silence, trailing our sleigh, the nip of the late afternoon stung our cheeks to roses and our breaths trailed behind like the gaseous tail of a very young and leisurely comet. Jean complained that one of her hands was growing cold so I took the mitten off it and drew the hand down into my deep, warm over-coat pocket, where we took all precautions against frost-bite. The other hand had to take a chance.

We walked along the bottom of the gully for shelter from the wind which was rising with sunset. As we neared Twenty-two Jean stopped.

"Frank, I want to ask you a question," she said. "There was no truth in that story you told me?"

"You care?"

"Of course I care. Tremendously."

"Don't you want me to be big?"

"Not that way. I've been talking about intellectual things—spiritual things."

"I suppose Spoof's bathing suit, with the white and yellow, is quite spiritual?"

"That isn't fair."

"Oh yes it is. It is merely the other ox getting gored."

"Anyway, your story wasn't true? You made it up to tease me?"

"If I answer your question will you answer mine?"

"I can't Frank, I can't—not now. I haven't seen Spoof since Christmas. Perhaps he's sick. Perhaps he's dead. Something awful may have happened."

"His smoke goes up every morning just the same."

"Oh, you've been watching it, too. But something has happened. I—I can't answer you now."

At the door of Jack's house we paused again. We were in the shadow there, and as she turned on the step her form swung close to mine. For a moment I seized her, no longer able to play the semi-Platonic.

"But there was no truth in it, was there?" she whispered.

"There was some truth in it," I confessed, as I turned toward the empty shack on Fourteen.

CHAPTER XXI.

Next morning I was stirring my oatmeal and water when the door opened and in burst Jack. His attire gave evidence of haste; he had thrown a pea-jacket about a somewhat incomplete toilet. I was about to summon up a jocular remark when something in his face silenced me.

"Have you seen Jean?" he demanded.

"No. Why——"

"She's not in her room. Gone. Was there last night—part of the night——"

"Sure she's not in the house?"

"Hard to lose her in our two-by-four, Frank. Not at the stables—I've hunted. It's snowing, and the wind is rising; there's no trail."

This was serious. Jack sat down, and, as though oppressed with heat, threw open his pea-jacket and exposed his undershirt.

Jean gone!

In a moment he sprang to his feet again and seized me by the arm. His grip was stronger than he knew. "She's not here, Frank? Straight now, Frank, she's not here?"

I turned my open palms toward him. "If only she were!" I exclaimed. "When did you miss her?"

"Ten—fifteen minutes ago, when I got up. I found my lamp out of oil, and I went to her room to borrow hers. She didn't answer, and I went in. She wasn't there. Her coat and cap are gone. How she got out without waking us!"

He turned to a window, peering through a little bare spot in the pane close to the sash. "Looks like a rough day," he said, quietly, as though trying to disguise the import of his words "She's been melancholy of late; trying to hide it, but I could tell My God, she may have been gone for hours!"

"Then it's time we were after her!" I exclaimed, a sudden impulse for action bringing me out of my stupor. I shoved my burning porridge to the back of the stove and rushed to my room to complete dressing. And in my head was pounding one word, Spoof—Spoof—Spoof!

"Where?" Jack demanded, from the door of my room. "What's your guess?"

But I was already becoming an artist, that artist that Jean so eagerly sought in me.

"Just two places," I said. "She's gone to Mrs. Alton's or to Mrs. Brown's. I don't think she would go to Lucy Burke's—didn't know them so well."

Jack's look of relief was pathetic. I had always thought of Jack as being in some way my superior, born to rule while I was born to obey. Suddenly I found him a child in my hands.

"You think so?" he grasped at my words. "You think—that's—where she's gone?"

"Nothing surer. We talked a good deal about Mrs. Alton yesterday." I added, out of the fulness of my invention, "and she said how lonely Mrs. Alton must be, and that we ought to go over and see her. She's started worrying over that in the night and it's got on her mind—upset her a bit. Still, it might be Brown's. The danger is that she may be lost in this storm. Hustle back and finish dressing, and then strike for Mrs. Alton's. I'll try Brown's first, then Jake's, then Burke's. Hustle!"

It was new business for me to order Jack, but he needed ordering to keep him from utter futility at that moment. I gave his hand a squeeze and thrust him out of the door.

"Now, Mr. Spoof—now for you!" I snapped to myself. I had a revolver, an old rusty weapon which I never used, but which I kept lying around in case of something which I called an emergency. Clearly this was it. I found it and some cartridges and thrust them into my overcoat pocket; then drew it out and studied it with a peculiar sort of fascination.

"Don't be a fool," I enjoined myself, as I threw it on the bed. But in a moment I picked it up again and put it in my pocket.

Outside the snow was flying in a sifting wind from the north-west. It was not a blizzard; it was not even a storm, but it had the threat of both. The sun was not up, and the grey light of dawn penetrated the snow waste not more than a dozen yards. I studied the wind for a moment, to make sure that it was blowing steadily in one direction; having satisfied myself as to this, my problem—one of my problems—was much simplified. Carrying the wind over my right shoulder I bore off toward the south and section Two.

The trail to Spoof's had been entirely obliterated in its weeks of non-usage, and I could do nothing better than follow my sense of direction. It became apparent that the sky was too overcast to give me any benefit from the sun, although the grey circle of dawn gradually grew until the vision would carry a hundred yards or so. For the most part the crust bore me, but here and there it gave away, and once or twice sent me floundering on my face. On such occasions I was careful to test my direction by the wind before continuing. If the wind should veer I had a good chance of wandering off into the wilderness—and the unknown.

That, too, was the chance which Jean had taken. It bore more and more heavily upon me as I plodded through that measureless waste of snow. I had no doubt that she had started for Spoof's; whether she ever had reached there was another question. She was able to stand his neglect no longer—she was bound to have it out with him, just as, yesterday, I had been bound to have it out with her. . . . At moments I wished that she might not find Spoof's. At moments it seemed that almost anything was better than that. There was the possibility that she might strike a circle and wander about on these vacant sections. It was not very cold; she would not freeze until exhaustion overcame her. Possibly even now she was wandering in these milky mists, even within earshot of me.

"Jean! Jean!" I cried, raising my voice against the buffeting of the wind, but it died unechoed in the void of space.

There was the possibility that she had been overcome; that even now she was lying somewhere on the white snow, her white, cold face turned to a white, cold sky, her lithe little body, no longer lithe, forming the occasion for a drift which the sifting wind had already seized as convenient to its purpose. . . . The sweat trickled down from under my cap and I pulled it off and let the comforting snow fall on my forehead. And now I used my eyes more than ever before, to detect, if I might, any object lying on the snow. Dark specks loomed up through the mist, and many a detour I made with pounding heart, to find only a prairie boulder or a lump of tumbleweed blown into a wolf willow.

Again, Jean might have reached Spoof's. That was going to be the most difficult possibility of all. What should I do? I fingered the weapon in my pocket, but I knew that that was nonsense. If Jean had gone to Spoof she had done so of her own free will; she need not account for herself to me; she might even resent my interference. Spoof might order me out as a meddling busybody; he might subject me to the torture of taking Jean from me before my very eyes. I was even less than Jack; had I been her brother I could have held him to accountability. But I would not be ordered out; I would not be abased—Surely I had a right. I was her friend, her neighbour. . . .

Her neighbour. "Perhaps that is the trouble," she had said.

I fingered my revolver affectionately. I was glad I had brought it.

I looked at my watch. It was twenty minutes after nine. I had been fool enough to start without noting the time, and had no idea how far I had travelled. Surely I should be near Spoof's now.

But our engagement had never been quite cancelled. Or had it? I tried to recall, but my mind blurred. Once we were engaged; we were to have been married before this time; Jean and I were to have been married at Christmas. Then Spoof. I was not clever enough for her. . . . Perhaps Spoof would be, I thought, and hated myself for thinking it.

Perhaps she was right. I was a good bit of a dub. Never read much, never thought much. Bounded by the corner stakes of Fourteen. An ox. Jean had as much as called me an ox. Thinking more about oats than sunsets.

Didn't even mention her new cap. When I did I turned my compliment upside down; pinned it to the cap, instead of to her. Spoof would not have done that.

Our poem. The snow would be deep on it now. Or perhaps not. It might have whipped clear. If—if anything happened to Jean I would go to that poem, I would yearn over it, I would caress it, I would lean upon it—it was snow, and would be gone in the spring. Something about keeping her guessing. I was to keep her guessing. Well, she was keeping me

guessing just now, with a vengeance!

I tried to call Jean up in my memory, to visualize her profile, her eyes, her hair, her lips, the tilting lift of her ankle, the joyous stride of her young, free limbs. It was all a mist; a picture out of focus. It was a nebulous thing, vague, indistinct, unformed. Through and beyond it I saw the grey snow falling eternally. Then about this central figure—if one may call a thing so ethereal a figure—gathered a circle of light, an irradiance glowing on a million crystals of frost; it grew and glowed and brightened until it haloed about her head. It was Jean!

"Oh! my God" I cried. "Not yet! Not yet!"

I fell in the snow. I floundered aimlessly in the broken crust. . . .

When I came back to realization the vision was gone. Only the snow, shot through with its thin mists of light, fell on forever.

Was I freezing? The thought prodded me to consciousness. I drew a hand from my mitt and thrust it against my face. The fingers were warm. The skin of my forehead would wrinkle. I was able to wriggle my toes in my boots. No, I was not freezing. My troubles were of the mind; my bodily engines were functioning properly. I got the wind over my right shoulder and pressed on.

Jean wanted me to keep her guessing. That was the easy, slangy way of putting it. Poetic license, she had called it. What she meant was that I must always have something in reserve; some mysterious corner of myself into which she had not explored. Something to keep up the sense of mystery, the spirit of adventure, in which romance is born, without which romance must die. No doubt she was right. After all, why *should* she marry me? What was I more than a biped beast of burden, an animal designed to eat, sleep, labor, and reproduce itself? . . . Spoof was something more than that. Was I wise to interrupt them at all? Why not leave them alone?

It was while I wrestled with the thought of a great renunciation that the light broke about me. I was sure that animal for animal—ox for ox—Jean preferred me to Spoof. It was in those qualities that were not animal that she preferred him. It was for me, therefore, by all means, to delay her decision, and then to set about deliberately to develop the qualities in which I was at a disadvantage. I must read. These idle winter months gave me the very opportunity to read, and I cursed myself that so many weeks had slipped by unimproved. What to read? I had my old school books and a bible—little else. Still, if one knew his bible—if I were to read up some book in it, develop a simple philosophy out of it, enveigle Jean into an argument, and best her, that would be keeping her guessing, wouldn't it? I could borrow books from Spoof. It was a strange sidelight on my feelings toward Spoof that even at this moment and for this purpose there seemed nothing unnatural in the thought that I should borrow books from him. Other neighbours might have books; one never can tell. Most people remain unread, not from lack of books, but from lack of application. There was the Reverend Locke. I would make an excuse to town, and would borrow books from him. I would even spend a few of my hard earned dollars on magazines, or on membership in a mail order library. Of all this Jean was to know nothing. I would keep her guessing.

I trudged on in a mood akin to cheerfulness. I had made my decision. I had stepped out of an old world into a new one. Something which must have lain dormant all these years awoke and thrilled me with the possibilities of what I might become. Life for me was no longer a thing of the body, which is death, but a thing of the mind and spirit, which are eternal. And yet . . . In imagination I allowed myself to feel Jean's hair brushing my cheek.

Presently something waved to me out of the mist. I stopped, with eyes intent. Undoubtedly something was waving to me out of the mist. "Jean! Jean!" I called, but there was no answer. I moved toward it eagerly, and suddenly the mystery was made clear. It was a great sunflower, clothed in hoary frost, nodding in the wind. I smiled to myself at its almost spectral appearance; then glancing ahead I saw another and another and another; a whole row of them. This was Spoof's! These were the sunflowers which he had planted in accordance with Jake's grotesque advice. Spoof's shack must be nearby. Surely, there to the left, was duller darkness through the snow.

I hurried toward it. The angular outline of Spoof's shack emerged gradually out of the mist, like a sunken boat rising slowly to the surface of the water. Half of it was concealed at best by the great drifts that bordered it. I found my way to the shack, around the corner, to the door. Should I knock? Prairie manners, particularly among bachelor neighbours, are free and easy. It would be no great breach of etiquette for me casually to enter Spoof's house without knocking. I believed I had done that before. And there would be a purpose in it, now of all times . . . I knocked.

There was no answer. That was subject to different explanations. A knock on a bachelor's door, miles from a neighbour, in midwinter, is a thing so unexpected that sometimes the ear does not register it; it merely cocks itself to make sure if the sound should be repeated.

I knocked again. In a moment the door opened, and I saw Spoof, in a flannel shirt and smoking jacket, corduroy trousers, moccasins—I think I took in every detail of his attire. His tie was drawn neatly up to the throat; his hair was well brushed; he had not shaved. His moustache was heavier, his face paler, thinner——

"Why, Frank!" he exclaimed. I seemed to hear both welcome and embarrassment in his voice. "Come in, old man! This is quite a day at section Two."

On account of the dull weather and the frosted windows Spoof had a lamp burning; it was a brass lamp, with a twisted, ornamental bowl and a cloth shade of some old gold color. It stood on a shelf which he had built in a corner of his only room; its subdued but cheerful light touched the objects in the little shack with a glint of color which was in sharp contrast to the drab day outside. Spoof's couch had been made up; his steamer rug lay tucked about it. The walls were a maze of firearms, prints, curios. There was the warmth of a fire and the odor of something cooking.

In the corner opposite to the lamp, on the floor, on a mat, sat Jean. Her knees were propped up in front of her and her long, supple fingers were linked about them. It was as she had sat that day—what, only yesterday?—with me under the great drift on the bank of the gully. A tapestry affair of some kind, hung on the wall, sheltered her from direct contact with the cold boards, and a cushion with a yellow dragon further protected her. She looked up at me as I entered and her face was a riddle too enigmatic to analyse. Annoyance, defiance, pleasure, humor, indifference, were strangely and inextricably interwoven.

"Hello, Frank," she said, quietly.

"You see, Je——Miss Lane is an early caller," Spoof explained. "Although not a frequent one," he added, "any more than you are. If she had known you were coming no doubt you would have come together."

"Yes, that might have been better," I said, pointedly.

"The trail is gone," Spoof continued, ignoring the jab in my remark. "It must have taken some skill to find the direction."

"Particularly before daylight," I said, more pointedly than before.

"Oh, don't quizz, Frank," Jean protested. "I'll tell you all about it presently. I was just saying to Spoof, when your knock interrupted me, how much the wiser the Japanese are than we. They sit on the floor, as nature intended them to do, and how graceful they are! I am playing the part."

"But not for that reason, I am afraid," said Spoof. "You see, I rejoice in only one chair, called 'easy' by way of courtesy. Miss Lane refused to sit in it while I stood, and I, of course, could not sit in it while she stood. So she solved a deadlock by sitting on the floor."

Nothing very incriminating about all this. They were just chatting naturally; surely they couldn't be such actors as to stage this dialogue without a moment's notice. Still—I had had to knock the second time.

"You have breakfasted?" Spoof inquired.

"Why, I am afraid I must confess I haven't. I left home rather unexpectedly." I was not disposed to beat about the bush, and the commonplaceness of their talk irritated me. Surely here was a situation bad enough without making it worse by pretending there was nothing bad about it.

Spoof glanced at a clock which chuckled away amiably on his wall. "We can have lunch within an hour," he said. With a fork he prodded something stewing on the stove. "Yes, the rabbit is almost done. By Jove, a good fat one! Fancy how they pick so lordly a living! Will you wait, or would you rather have a bite now? I can only give you bread and marmalade at once. You must be hungry."

"No, I'm not hungry," I said, truthfully enough. The fact is, I couldn't keep my eyes off Jean. Now and again, when she didn't know I watched, her face seemed to take on something of melancholy; but mostly it was bright, responsive, vivacious. She seemed to fit so wonderfully—physically and mentally she fitted so wonderfully into Spoof's shack. She

had laid her overshoes aside and as she sat the brown ribs of her homeknit stockings peeped over the top of a neatly laced boot. This was before the days of the frank revelations of our modern fashions. Her intertwined fingers shuttled slowly back and forth against each other; her lips were ruddy in the glow from the little brass lamp; her hair, parted in the middle and drawn into a wavy roll at the back of her head gave her a peculiarly girlish appearance. She was so young, so small, and withal so wise, so venturesome, so defiant. The place where my breakfast should have been contracted with a great yearning; a huge emptiness filled me.

So we waited for the rabbit to stew, and Spoof and Jean chatted on. I was more the audience than one of the players. They were away into some dispute about atmospheric colorings; something that had to do with rainbows, sun-dogs, ice prisms, light radiation. It was beyond me; so obviously beyond me that Spoof had mercy and brought Jean back to earth.

"What do you think of the scheme to form a new Province here—two new Provinces," he shot at me, "instead of our present Districts? More autonomy and more taxes as I see it."

"Yes, I suppose," I groped. The fact is I knew nothing about it.

"Would seem more natural to follow the old district boundaries, though," Spoof commented. "They say they are going to run the Provinces from south to north—as far as the sixtieth parallel. There'll be an election next year. You ought to think about that, Frank. It would be some honor to sit in the first parliament of Saskatchewan."

The idea struck me as grotesque. I said so.

"Why not?" Jean demanded, and there was fire in her voice. "Perhaps not the first parliament, but some parliament," she qualified.

"Some parliament," I said to myself. "Perhaps. If I had Jean to goad me on I might do—anything."

Spoof scraped a corner clear on the window pane, and said some lines about "Snow cold—in snow." It was something about a soldier dying in the trenches; not wounded, or fighting, but just dying in the snow. I saw Jean's wrapt attention; the glisten of her eyes; the gulp of her white throat. What power was this the man had over her? Was this all a thing of mind, or was it body, too? I had told myself that, animal for animal, Jean would prefer me. As I looked at Spoof's strong figure, well knit, well clad, I wondered.

In some way we put in the hour. I did not press the subject, the question, the suspicion which was turmoiling my mind. It was Jean's move. I waited for her.

CHAPTER XXII.

Spoof set his little table with a linen cloth and napkins and amazingly good dishes. The meal was to consist of stewed rabbit, with potatoes and carrots; bread and cheese and tea. Jean sprang up to cut the bread and make the tea. There was something poignantly domestic in their two figures, shoulder to shoulder—although his shoulder came high over hers—studying the inside of the teapot as though they were crystal gazing (and perhaps they were) while they disputed as to the exact amount of tea for three. It was a new problem for Spoof, but a common one for Jean, and she had her way.

It was not until we had finished lunch, and Spoof had rolled me a cigarette, and the dishes were cleared away and some sort of tapestry cover substituted on the table, that Jean saw fit to refer to her behavior.

"I promised you that if you didn't quizz I would tell you all about it, Frank," she said, suddenly. "You have been a good boy, and I will keep my word."

"By Jove, I haven't fed the bullocks," Spoof exclaimed. "That's what comes of having company. I really should have a man. If the Governor saw me leave my guests to feed a pair of ungracious old bulls he would be permanently humiliated. You won't mind, will you?"

We wouldn't, and in a moment Spoof was plowing toward his stables.

"You think I'm a wild woman, and pretty much of a fool," said Jean. "Come, this bench is a sad invention. Let's sit on the floor."

She went back to her station in the corner, and made me sit down beside her. "There, that's better," she said. "You think I'm a wild woman, and pretty much of a fool. Let's pass the first count. On the second we agree. Now I'll give you the whole story without frills.

"You know, of course, why I cancelled our engagement. We've covered that ground; no use plowing it again. I believed I loved Spoof; I hoped he loved me. But since Jack's wedding he had avoided us. I have been in a torture of uncertainty. After our talk yesterday I couldn't stand it any longer.

"I woke up this morning, about five o'clock, thinking of him, and as I thought a vague, wild plan which had been haunting me took form. If Mohammed wouldn't come to the mountain, the mountain would go to Mohammed. You see, I have reversed the figure, as is right in this case. It was a wild idea, but once I got it clearly in my head there was nothing to do but go through with it. I knew I would be found out; I knew all that you and Jack and Marjorie would think, even if you didn't say it. But there comes a time when none of these things matter—do you understand? . . .

"So I dressed as quietly as I could, and slipped out. It wasn't snowing then; the stars were bright and numberless; I got my bearings and struck out. As I passed your shanty I stopped at your window. All was dark and still. 'Dear old boy,' I whispered against your window pane, 'I wish things were different—but they're not.'"

She had laced her fingers again about her knees, but now she dropped the hand next to me, and it fell on mine. There was nothing surreptitious about it; it was deliberate, designed, aggressive.

"I had covered most of the distance before it began to snow. Then I was in danger for a while, but I made it all right. Unfortunately, Spoof is not an early riser. He was surprised to see me."

She stopped, and for a long while gazed into space, as though studying what she would say next.

"Well, I proposed to him. He refused me," she said quietly.

"Refused you? . . . Do you mean that's the whole story?"

"That's the substance; I told you I would leave out the frills. You can decorate it to your liking. One of the secrets of art is to not over-state yourself—leave something to the imagination. The more intelligent the audience, the more may be left to the imagination. You are an intelligent audience, Frank."

Through my absurd concern for, I hardly knew what, her adorable tantalization seethed in me like an electric current. And so selfish am I—and all men—that it was some minutes before I realized that Jean had received a knock-out blow;

that she had humiliated herself to this man Spoof; that she had placed her womanhood at his feet, and he had spurned it. Just what it was for me to lose Jean, just that same must it be for Jean to lose Spoof.

"And he refused you—refused you," I repeated, when this thought had settled clearly in my mind. "Jean, I don't see how —any man—could do that."

"He was kind—considerate," she said, quietly. "Said he was sorry; appreciated the compliment; any man might be flattered, he said, but it was quite impossible. So I am left dangling in space."

"Well, what next?" I asked, after a long silence in which, consciously or unconsciously, she was drawing her finger tips slowly up and down between the backs of mine. "What next?"

"Go home," she said, decisively. "Jack and Marjorie will be uneasy. You will see me home, won't you?"

Spoof took an inordinately long time to feed the oxen, but when he returned, with great blowing and stamping before opening the door, we were ready for the road. We took leave without much in the way of explanations, but with his promise to come and see us at least once a week.

Our long walk home was taken in almost complete silence. Once I suggested to Jean that we should let it be understood that she had gone to Brown's, not Spoof's.

"Just as you like," she said. "I don't care."

I took her arm in places where the crust broke easily; where it was solid we walked separately, swinging out into easy strides. I was studying the new situation; trying to analyze the new atmosphere; seeking to locate myself in a chart of the universe in which the two objects were Jean and me. But some fine instinct kept me from any word of love.

As we neared Twenty-two Jean took my arm, although here the path was good.

"Thank you so much," she said. "I thought you would, perhaps,—that you would go back to what we talked of yesterday. I couldn't stand that, just now. Do you understand? You are considerate; you are—an artist," and her face smiled wanly into mine.

Jack had just returned from Mrs. Alton's. He had found her in a rather bad way, much in need of a man to do up rough work about the place, and even in his anxiety over Jean he had stayed to lend a hand. Something about the widow's loneliness had touched him almost as deeply as our own shadow of tragedy.

I lied glibly about having found Jean at Mrs. Brown's; Mrs. Brown was well, but one of the children had a sore throat; Brown had slipped on the ice and hurt his hip, not badly; they were longing for English mail. I knew all this duplicity must be found out, but I was content to delay the evil day. By some sort of telegraphic understanding we did not discuss Jean's behavior. We were glad enough to have her back safe and sound; we were willing to agree that the stress of winter had perhaps been too much for her. She would be all right presently.

The days that followed were busy times for me. I immediately began to glean the neighbourhood for books, and the harvest was much more liberal than I expected. Spoof lent me Byron and the Decline and Fall; Brown supplied a complete Shakespeare, in one volume; Bella Donna contributed a Life of Lincoln; Burke, much to my surprise, had a copy of Whitman, from which he quoted copiously, gesticulating to me in an empty stall,—he was a deep pool where I had looked for shallow water; Andy Smith was equally insistent upon rehearsing Burns, and particularly to the effect that the rank is but the guinea's stamp, etc. I did not call upon Mrs. Alton, nor venture into the unguessed possibilities of Hansen's and Sneezi's, although after my experiences I was almost prepared to find Ole Hansen buried in The Wealth of Nations, and Sneezi poring over Carlyle. Neither did I, at the time, enlist the good offices of the Reverend Locke. In a community that I had supposed destitute of anything of the sort I had unearthed more books than I could read.

At first I had to drive myself to it, but presently I began to be carried away in the spirit in the new world which was opening before me. With joy I noted, suddenly, that I had forced my boundaries far beyond the corner stakes of Fourteen, beyond even the prairies, the continent, the times in which we live. My mind, from sluggishly hibernating for the winter, became a dynamo of activity. As soon as the morning chores were done I was at my books, and I felt it almost a hardship when Jack would drop in for a game of checkers or a chat about nothing. Late into the night I followed my heroes and heroines, my theories and philosophies, until at last I drew off grudgingly to bed. I had made a resolve that I would not

read in bed; there must be a limit somewhere. It was hard to realize that these flying hours were the same as those which had dragged so leadenly only a few short days ago.

Tremendously I wanted someone to whom I might talk. I was so filled with thoughts that I threatened to burst. I began to be primed for unbounded arguments. Jean was the one with whom I wanted most to talk, but I was keeping my explorations a strict secret from the neighbours on Twenty-two. I had contrived to damage my door lock in such a way that I had to bar the door from the inside to keep it shut; this gave me an opportunity to hide my book when Jack came bumping in, or when Jean and Marjorie called on their frequent visits. To all of them I had become something of an enigma; Jean particularly regarded me with a strange questioning.

My pressure of ideas became so threatening that at last I burst out into the neighbourhood to relieve it. I found my safety valve in the most unexpected place—Andy Smith. The little Scotsman was amazingly read and belligerently eager for argument. It seemed that I was as much a surprise and Godsend to him as he to me. He would carry me continually beyond my depth, but it is in deep water that one learns to swim. And occasionally my irregular reading enabled me to punch him into a hole from which he came up spluttering.

"Man, man!" he would exclaim, "I never thoct ye would ha' kened aboot that. I must be brushin' up. . . . Hall, ye're a lad o' pairts. Why do ye no take a hand in the makin' o' this new Province we're tae ha' oot here, all tae oorsel's? I'll be nominatin' ye yet, ye'll see."

I laughed, but the plump of his suggestion left a pleasant ripple in my mind. After all, hadn't Jean and Spoof said something about that? Of course it was out of the question, but——

One day Jean came over to Fourteen, alone. I buried my Shakespeare under a pair of old overalls and opened the door. Perhaps she saw me glancing about, as though looking for Marjorie.

"Unchaperoned, to-day," she said. "You don't mind?" She began to draw off her gloves; new knitted gloves which I had not seen before.

"New gloves, Jean?" I queried.

"Yes, just finished knitting them, from yarn mother sent. Feel them. Aren't they soft?"

"I envy them very much," I said, and was much pleased with my subtlety.

"Envy them—why? . . . Oh, you mean because they're—they're always holding my hands," and a happy wave of color flushed into her cheeks. "You are very clever."

"Thanks, Jean. Now take off that pretty little cap of yours, which is not half as beautiful as the hair it hides, and let me draw off your overshoes—I have a grievance against them, as well—and we'll just sit down and settle the affairs of the universe."

"I wish we could," she said, with a note that had lost most of its joyousness; "I rather wish we could. But where have you been hiding? And why? And did that afternoon we spent coasting bore you so that you have never asked me out since?"

"Oh, I've been busy," I said. "Very busy."

"Busy? At what?"

Then I could forbear no longer. My secret was about to burst from me. I took Jean's coat and cap; I seated her; I drew off her overshoes; I stirred the fire.

"Busy? Yes, I'm very busy. I have a big world to think about. In the words of the poet:

"I love not man the less, but Nature more,
From these our interviews, in which I steal
From all I may be, or have been before,
To mingle with the Universe, and feel
What I can ne'er express, yet cannot all conceal."

"Lovely!" she exclaimed. "Why, Frank! . . . That's from—from——"

"I have you guessing, Jean," I remarked, dryly.

"You memorized that on purpose; you dug a pit for me," she protested. "Still, better that than none. Come, 'fess up. Where is it?"

I drew my Byron from its place of concealment.

"Ah, if you had started at the beginning of the stanza with, 'There is a pleasure in the pathless wood,' I would have known," she said. "Still——"

We turned the pages together, lingering through a new land of delight that was delicious and wonderful. I read "She walks in Beauty," and we sat in silence after the lines,

"A mind at peace with all below,
A heart whose love is innocent."

"I'm not so sure, Frank," she said at length. "My mind is not so much at peace as I could wish; my love is perhaps not so _____"

She left the sentence unfinished.

"I know it is," I said, "I know it is."

The book lay open before us. Her hands had fallen on its printed pages. I drew them slowly into mine; drew them up and about my neck. "Jean," I whispered, "You know there is only, ultimately, one answer. Why not give it now!"

"Not yet, Frank. We shall see. Don't you understand? I must wait and see whether you have really—outgrown yourself—or are just memorizing verses with me for a prize."

"All right," I said. "I'll wait and prove it. But I warn you—I can't foresee where this thing is going to lead. It may not be content with books, only; already I'm rather sure it will want more than books. It may lead me out into the world. There are other women, there, Jean," I added, significantly.

"I know. I understand. I must take my chance. It is worth even that to be sure—in the end."

After a while I made tea, and just as we were sitting down to it came a knock at the door. It was a sharp, dignified knock; not the boisterous thump which either Jack or Marjorie would have given it.

"Who's that?" we asked each other.

"Alas, we are discovered!" Jean rippled. "It is a real adventure."

I opened the door to find Spoof's tall figure outside, and in his arms a large and pudgy and uncertain bundle. It was a moment before I saw the second figure—that of a woman. She wore a heavy fur coat, and her face was veiled for the inclement day.

"Why, Spoof! . . . Come in!" I commanded. "Jean and I are just having tea. Let me put your oxen in."

"They are all right for the moment; they're in the shelter. I must make some introductions, first."

We welcomed them in, and Spoof set his bundle down on end in the middle of the floor, and began to unwind it. The woman removed her coat and cap and veil. It was Mrs. Alton. The bundle resolved itself into Mrs. Alton's boy.

"Miss Hall, let me present my wife," said Spoof. "My wife. And my son Gerald."

CHAPTER XXIII.

After the first blank moment of surprise I turned, not to Spoof or "Mrs. Alton" or the boy, but to Jean. There was a momentary tremulousness, but almost instantly Jean had herself under control; she was more the artist than I knew. I began to realize how far her artistry carried.

"This *is* news!" she cried. "When did——" She stopped short. A wave of color flushed her face. Gerald did not admit of casual explanation.

The child, now relieved of cumbersome clothing, was standing on sturdy feet in the middle of the room getting his bearings. His big, intelligent eyes were losing no time in making an appraisal of me and mine.

Jean swooped upon him; clasped him up in her arms. Perhaps it was because at that moment she must have action. Her face was pressed into his little white neck. "Big Boy, Big Boy," she whispered, "why didn't you tell me this before?"

Spoof and his wife and I still stood as though rooted to the floor. The woman seemed to avoid my gaze, but when at times I caught a glimpse of her face there was something finer than embarrassment in it; there was embarrassment, it is true, but something almost seraphic as well.

Suddenly, "I think we women should go over to Twenty-two," Jean exclaimed. "Marjorie must know the great news. Come, Jerry!"

At the door the collie joined them, capering uneasily in the snow. Spoof and I watched them as they took their way along the well-trodden trail across the gully; then we stabled his oxen in silence.

Back in the house, Spoof drank a cup of tea and rolled me a cigarette—I never smoked cigarettes except under Spoof's malign influence—before he showed a disposition to talk. Then, seated on one of my rough benches, behind the blue haze of his own tobacco smoke, he spoke.

"It's a long story, Hall, if one covered all the details," he said. "Fortunately, between friends, that isn't necessary."

"I married this woman that you know as Mrs. Alton five years ago Christmas Day. You will understand why Jack's wedding was something of an anniversary to me. In course of time Gerald was born. Up until then, and for some time afterwards, everything was all right.

"Then—something happened. In what I chose to call righteous indignation I turned her out. Perhaps it was more mortified pride, or just blind, beast jealousy. Never mind. Through it all I gave myself credit for being just, even generous. I gave her half of my ready money, which wasn't much; I've never been much of a money-grabber, Hall; it has always seemed such an inconsequential business. But I gave her half of what I had, and settled on Gerald the small income I could command, and let her keep the boy. That was the biggest thing. I see a good deal of it through different light to-day, but for letting her keep the boy I demand some credit still. I've done one or two hard things, Hall. You know. That was one of them."

He finished his cigarette and lit another.

"Then I came out here," he continued. "It seemed the wisest thing to do. I was settling into the hope of forgetting it all and making a new start when she followed me." He held up his hand as if to silence me, although I had made no move to speak. "I don't blame her—now," he said. "But then—last summer, you know—it rather interfered. I may as well be frank with you. I had an idea that Jean would just about complete section Two. She's a wonderful girl, Jean.

"Then came Alice, and I knew *that* wouldn't do. It would make blackmail too easy. I was base enough to think of that.

"After Jack's wedding I gave the whole thing some serious thought. I surmised how the land lay between you and Jean, and what had interrupted your plans. I concluded that the only decent thing to do was to drop out of your lives, for the time being. Well, Jean wouldn't have it. You know—the other day. . . . That was one of the hard things I was thinking about when I spoke of them a moment ago.

"Frank, she lit a thousand old fires of memory that morning. Moving about in my room; sitting at my table; pouring my tea—God, man, do you understand? It was too much for anybody. . . . I don't know what would have happened. At any rate,

I ask you to believe that I was making my fight. . . . Then you came."

He threw away half of an unsmoked cigarette and rolled another.

"Then I spent some sleepless nights, Frank, old boy. I was glad you had come, and even in my gladness for that sometimes I wished you—We humans are such queer mixtures; beyond analysis. But the more I admitted these things to myself the more I had also to admit that something might be said for Alice. Alice had once been to me all that it now seemed that Jean might be. I wondered if, by some miracle, that might not come again. Wasn't the obstacle, all the obstacle, the only obstacle, right in my own mind? What if I should root it out? What if I should say, 'I'm too big a man to submit to this; I refuse to be tyrannized by a little jealous demon in one corner of my mind?' . . .

"I began to think that perhaps after all Alice's purpose in following me here was quite different from what I had suspected. Women are strange creatures. They keep you guessing, as you say in this country."

"Better that than boredom," I heard my own voice saying.

"Shake!" said Spoof, springing suddenly to his feet and seizing me by the hand. "Shake! By Jove, I didn't know it was in you. If I were a moralist, setting light houses on the reefs about the sea of matrimony, I would set the biggest, blazingest light on Boredom. But nobody set a light on it for me . . .

"Besides, I wanted tremendously to see the boy.

"So yesterday I hitched the oxen and broke trail over to 'Widow Alton's.' My afflictions had brought me to a sufficiently humble frame of mind to let Alice say her say. For awhile she couldn't say anything; just wept, you know, and cried my name over and over, and sometimes Gerald's. Mighty uncomfortable for a man standing around and feeling that in some way he's to blame for it all.

"Well, when we got down to facts she had come in the hope of raising money by means of homesteading so that she could educate the boy. Fancy that, and me associating her with blackmail! But when she found, through old Jake, that I had located here, she wasn't above following. And yet she was afraid of me; afraid she'd meet me somewhere; afraid I'd come over to her homestead; and all the time hoping I would! Women are strange creatures.

"Well, we talked it all over, and"—and for the first time in his narrative Spoof's face lighted with a gentle smile—"I didn't go back to Two last night at all. We're planning a sort of quinquennial honeymoon progress about the district, and, properly enough, our first call is at Fourteen. And now that that's off my chest, behold a man happy once more. I am amazed at the folly that denied me all these years——Men, too, are strange creatures.

"There's just one thing—a very insignificant thing compared with Alice's happiness, and mine, and Gerald's, but it's this: In taking up her homestead she had to declare herself a widow. She did it for the boy's sake, and she knows she will have to give up the claim, but will she get into further trouble? Will they let it go at that?"

That was a poser, and I turned it over in my mind for some minutes. "Better see Jake about that," I suggested. "He'll find a way."

"That's right!" said Spoof. "Jake's the boy. And he owes me something yet on that cogitation nut transaction.

"Just one more thing," Spoof resumed, after a little. "I've told you a great deal more than I propose to tell anyone else. It seemed to me that you—and Jean—had a peculiar right to know."

Almost before we knew it the springtime was upon us. It came suddenly, out of a March sky and a south-west wind, and the hard, illimitable distances of winter softened and mellowed before our eyes. The drifts fell away; brown spots came out on the edge of the gully; little streamlets cataracted over its banks; blue snow-water gathered in its depressions; adventurous early gophers sent their challenge from bank to bank. The waters in the gully gathered and grew; presently they were forcing ahead, into and under and over the drifts that barred their way; their pleasant gurglings came up through the clear, calm, lengthening twilights.

The bare fields came forth; the dark brown clodded earth looked up in a million mimic mountain peaks through a wrinkled blanket of snow; the grass stirred on the prairies; a flush of green ran down the long shadows of the evening. Once more was the world alive!

They were busy times for us. Every hour of springtime, like the seed sown in the spring, multiplies many fold by autumn; the tale of slothfulness in spring is written big in harvest—or rather, in lack of harvest. As soon as the snow was gone from the plowed fields and the frost was out an inch or two we were at work with our harrows; then, in a few days more, sowing our crops. There was a pleasant neighbourliness, a satisfying community of interest, in casting the eye across our level prairies and noting the slow-moving seeder-shuttles plying up and down across the cool, moist warp of earth.

The skies and clouds of springtime were almost as wonderful as the prairie dawns and sunsets. I suppose it is because of the vast sameness of the prairies themselves that we learned to turn our eyes so often to the heavens. When one's vision is hemmed about by woods and hills he is in danger of missing the greater majesty of the skies. Many a breathing spell had Buck and Bright while I turned in my plow-handles to watch the gentle drift of cloud shadows gliding over the fields, or to plunge my eyes into the blue vacuum of eternal space.

When Jean would bring my lunch at four in the afternoon we would sit on the grass in the shade of the wagon at the end of the field and daydream for a moment or two with feathery, fleecy, high-flying clouds of heaven as a background for our fancies. Sometimes great, billowy, boisterous, low-lying masses loomed up in our horizon, level along the bottom like islands floating in a sea of space; heaped and puffed and pinnacled in their upper parts. If these gathered and grew we might expect a dash of rain with a bright sun afterwards and a rainbow in the east.

Jean would throw the remaining crumbs to the gophers and massage Buck's forehead between the horns before she left. This was always a popular proceeding for Buck. He acknowledged it by circling his prodigious tongue about his nose, and sometimes embracing Jean's apron in its orbit.

It had been arranged that during the busy season I should take my meals at Jack's, and Jean had volunteered the duty of carrying my afternoon lunches to the field. There was little time now for either poetry or prose, and yet we lived amazingly in the spirit. Between the plow-handles one must think of something, and I recalled and re-recalled those things I had read during the winter. At lunch time, or in the evenings, I would talk of them with Jean, always trying to approach her from some new and unsuspected angle. As, for instance, when a summer shower threatened us, I quoted (I had borrowed a Shelley from Spoof):

"I bring fresh showers for the thirsting flowers,
From the seas and the streams;
I bear light shade for the leaves when laid
In their noon-day dreams.
From my wings are shaken the dews that waken
The sweet buds every one—"

Jean turned her face to mine, and something in her eyes was deeper than the great clouds gathering overhead. "A year ago you would have said, 'Looks like rain,'" was her ample comment.

With springtime came ducks to the pond, and to our table. Jean had so far overcome her reluctance to killing that she would crawl with me for what seemed ages, worming along through the grass of the slopes on the northern side of the pond, for the chance of sharing with me that moment of ecstasy in which I killed a living thing. The ducks had been much shot at in their flight northward and were careful to avoid the ambush afforded by the grove on the southern side of the pond. Eventually Jean began taking out the gun on her own account, and it was a tremendously proud day when she brought home her first mallard. Usually we did our shooting in the evening, when the banks were in the shadow but there was still light on the water. The sharp whistle of duck wings would be followed by the flash of my gun and the glow of burnt wadding. . . . Then there was the walk home through the gleaming night.

We had built a bridge of poles in the gully at the road between Fourteen and Twenty-two, as a stream a foot deep was now flowing across the path. One evening, just as I was unharnessing the oxen, Jean came rushing to me in great

excitement.

"Frank, there are fish in the creek! I saw them darting in every direction! What can we catch them with?"

"Suckers, they'll be," said I, "but even a sucker is good in the spring." We hurried to the stable, where we got two hay forks.

"You stand on guard on the bridge, and if any go through, jab 'em," I directed. "I'll go down stream and drive 'em up."

It was not long until I detected half a dozen forms, almost black in the water, and resting in the most innocent stillness except for the constant dilation of mouth and gills. I jabbed at the nearest. But a fish in the water is not exactly where he seems to be, and I missed him. He and his company dashed at tremendous speed toward the bridge, with me in wild pursuit. After the first step or two I abandoned the bank and plunged into the stream, striking and jabbing recklessly. Suddenly I landed one—pierced through the tail, I must confess—and threw him far up the bank.

"Oh, they're coming, they're coming! I see them!" Jean shouted. She teetered for a moment on the plank; then jumped—or fell—into the stream and was jabbing about, somewhat to the menace of my feet, and her own. Her skirts trailed wetly down the tide, and clung about her limbs. But she was thinking not a bit of that. In wild triumph she threw out a fish bigger than mine, and jabbed where a fish ought to be jabbed.

One evening Spoof came over, carrying his gun.

"There's good crane shooting out at Reed Lake," he said. "Brown and I were up last night; got four beauties. Jean seems to be shooting rather well; thought you and she might like to go out on a crane hunt, so I brought over my gun."

"But you—you'll come, won't you?"

"No, not this time," said Spoof, sagely. "I've got all I can use for some days."

Jean was enthusiastic, so we quit work early the next afternoon and drove to Reed Lake, about seven or eight miles to the west. The sun was setting across an expanse of marshy water surrounded by low, reedy shores when we unspanned. A single clump of willows offered shelter on the eastern side of the lake, and we made our camp beside it.

Far out in the water were myriads of ducks but they kept well beyond range. We couldn't afford to waste cartridges on the snipe and plover that ran crying along the shore.

Slowly the long northern twilight settled into darkness as we sat in our camp and watched the colors gently dulling on the glass-like surface of the lake. Darker it grew, until the brighter stars came out. All was silent and still. But when one listened intently to the silence it became alive with noises. The grumbling of wild duck; the cry of a curlew; the blatant bombast of the bullfrog; the myriad industries of the little folk of night filled the air.

The light faded out of the west; the afterglow paled and darkened; a faint arc lay across the northern sky; a million stars winked at two campers sitting by a wagon and a willow bush, and drew their own conclusions.

I had fastened a horse blanket to the side of our wagon, dropping one edge to the ground. In front of it I spread another on the grass, and here we sat, sheltered from the cool night breezes that came solemnly whispering over the tops of the reeds that bordered the lake. While the light held out I had sat with a book in my hand, but we had not read; we were reading the book of earth and sky, of light and shadow, of wind and water, and perhaps of love.

"It is so dark," Jean said at length. "How can we see to shoot, even if they *do* come?"

Jean seemed to doubt the efficiency of any method of hunting that consisted in sitting down beside a horse blanket and waiting for the game to come up and be shot. She could understand crawling for a hundred yards, head down and heels down, except as a waving foot might serve to semaphore her signals. But to sit and wait. . . . She was counting stars.

"There they come!" I suddenly breathed, scarce daring to whisper, as a new note came up from the water. "Quietly—quietly."

We rose to our feet and stalked silently to the water's edge. There was nothing to be seen. We were surrounded entirely by reeds higher than our heads. We were sinking slowly in the moist mud; water was trickling through the lace holes in my boots.

"We'll have to go in," I whispered. "Are you game?"

I felt the pressure of her free hand upon my arm.

"Anywhere—with you."

So we stepped quietly but boldly into the water. It came to the ankles, the calves, the knees. Then we were through the reeds and the lake lay before us, dim and misty, like a sheet of frosted glass.

"We'll wait here. If we're lucky they'll come our way."

Out of the air came a rushing. Great wings beat almost upon our heads. But they came and were gone before we knew it.

"Just a couple of strays beating around the lake," I explained. "We'll wait for the waders."

Presently, and without notice save the soft splashing of water, they came wading down the shallows close to where we stood, their great bodies dim and dark against the frosted glass; their long necks stretched high, or grubbing in the reeds beside them. One—two—three—four—five—six; on they came.

"Take the first two; I'll take the next."

Our guns came to our shoulders in the darkness; we looked, rather than sighted, at the great birds scarce a rod away; then—right barrel!—left barrel!—we woke the echoes of the lake and filled the air with tempestuous noises. From every side came the splash of water and the rush of wings. The stillness, the gentleness of the night in a moment became the wildest babel of confusion.

But we had no thought for that. Splashing right before us were great forms; flapping, struggling, eddying about. I would have held Jean back but she rushed ahead of me into the melee. She had one by the neck; the lust of killing was upon her; it was a fight to a finish. . . . Afterwards we dragged them out—three of them. Jean declared there had been another, but he managed to hide himself in the rushes.

Then we built a fire beside the willow and warmed ourselves.

Before the water was warm enough for bathing I sent to Regina for a bathing suit. "The gaudiest thing you have," I said, and they took me at my word. It was a great day when I made my appearance in it. In the evenings, after a day of dust in the fields, we revelled in the cool waters of our pond. Jean would race me from end to end, but she was much too good a swimmer for me.

Then came one of those rare summer nights—rare on the prairies—when the air does not cool off with the approach of evening, and all the heat of day seems hemmed in by black clouds crowding overhead. I had gone to bed, but not to sleep. The far away flashing of heat lightning continuously lit my room with a vague twilight; my blankets had become unbearable, and I threw them off. The silence was intense; the very night seemed to brood over me; the perspiration stood out upon me. It took me back to the hot nights of the East, so little known with us, and from that starting point my mind went wandering down through old ways, down to the dam and the mill-wheel and the little boy and girl who were the starting point of all my recollections. Jean it had been then; Jean it was, with whom all my thoughts were linked; Jean was still the innermost hope of my heart. I had waited, patiently as I could, and the spring and summer months had seen arise between us an affection deeper, vaster, wider than anything I had known in those days when we had talked of love together. Our world had grown and we had grown with it. Ours was continually the spirit of the new adventure; continually a faring forth into the unknown.

But I had not talked of love. It had been my conception of artistry to speak no more of love, daring all my hope on the prospect that the fires which I guessed had been rekindled in Jean's heart would in time burst all her womanly restraint. Then she would come to me. Jean was big enough for that.

I had tried to follow her in spirit through the torment of those days after Spoof's revelation. I had guessed how hard it had been for her, and I kept silence. I conceived that that was artistry.

But there must be an end sometime—sometime soon. I was not all artist, like Jean. Artistry was my means to an end. There must be an end. . . . Which would be the beginning. . . .

Came a tapping on my window. I sat up quickly.

"Frank?"

"Yes?"

"Asleep?"

"Not within miles of it. Whew! Ever see a night like this?" I had thrust my head through the open window and could see her form dimly outlined against the night.

"Used to be the usual thing, down East," she answered. "But we get out of the way of them, here. Get up and let's go for a swim."

A flash of lightning revealed her in her bathing suit. I was soon out of bed and into mine.

"Beat you to the other end of the pond," she said, as we threaded our way down the well-worn path.

"You always beat me," I confessed. "But I'm game; I'll try again."

We took the water together; its comforting tide wrapped us about as we swung through it with long, easy strokes. Jean suited her pace to mine; her body was a rhythmic machine, lithe, supple, almost serpentine in its movements. Her hair was down. When a glow of distant lightning fell about us her face was ivory white, cameo-like, against the black water.

At the far end was a small beach of sand, and we drew ourselves up upon it. Jean drew her feet up tailor-wise, shook out her hair; traced idly with her fingers in the sand.

"I had a dream, Frank," she said at length. "I dreamed you were wrecked on a lonely island, where you seemed doomed to spend all your days. But one night when you were sleeping a nymph of the wilderness stole up and whispered something in your ear. And this is what she said: 'Go down to the beach at midnight and light a fire on the sand, and a beautiful maiden shall come up out of the sea. Take her; she is yours.'

"And you turned in your sleep and said, 'Mine—forever?' And the nymph said, 'Forever, if you will obey the law.'

"And you said, 'What law?' And the nymph said, 'The law of romance, which is the law of imagination, which is the law of beauty, which is the law of love, which is the law of life. If you are true to that law she shall be yours not only now, but forever, and this shall no longer be a lonely island, but a place called Paradise.' And then I woke up.

"That was a very wonderful dream, Jean," I said. "A very wonderful dream."

"And I have been wondering, Frank," she continued, her liquid voice dropping very low and soft, "I have been wondering if you were to light a fire on this beach—what would happen."

"It would be an interesting experiment," I agreed, "but I have no matches."

"I have provided against that. See, on this stone are matches, and beside it wood for a fire."

"Jean!" I exclaimed, a great light breaking about me. I extended my arms toward her; I would have rushed to her, but she evaded me in the darkness.

"Suppose you try the experiment, Frank," she said. "Let us see if there is anything in dreams."

I found the stone with the matches; I struck one; its light glowed genially in my face. I found the little pile of dry wood which she had gathered together; I knelt and set my match to it. I think in that moment I felt somewhat like a god before an altar; a whiff of fragrant willow smoke filled my nostrils like incense. Then I stood up and looked around for Jean. She was gone.

My little fire crackled and burned up merrily, sending its shaft of pale blue smoke heavenward in the night. The distant clouds still heliographed each other across the sky; their flashlights blinked on the surface of our pond from time to time.

Then I sat down and tried to recall what Jean had said. "A beautiful maiden shall come up . . . Take her. . . . She is yours —forever—if you obey the law."

"I will—I will obey!" I breathed.

Out on the dark water glowed a phosphorescent point. It drew steadily, straight toward me. It was the ripple of white water as a silent graceful figure cleft the tide in two. Onward she came, steadily, stroke by stroke. A flash of distant lightning lit her face cameo-like against the depths behind. She had touched the sand; she drew up from the water; she stood before me. I took her in my arms.

"Dreams *do* come true, if they're properly staged," she said when she could speak.

THE END.

T. N. BEST PRINTING CO. LIMITED. TORONTO

Transcriber's Notes: original hyphenation, spelling and grammar have been preserved as in the original

Page 6, twelve ==> twelve

Page 17, my boy! she said ==> my boy!" she said

Page 17, rhymic ==> rhythmic

Page 19, he said,, "You're ==> he said, "You're

Page 54, populars ==> poplars

Page 55, beligerent ==> belligerent

Page 60, coutry ==> country

Page 66, patroling ==> patrolling

Page 69, prodings ==> proddings

Page 69, Se we unhitched ==> So we unhitched

Page 82, amid the the luxury ==> amid the luxury

Page 96, simple precaution. ==> simple precaution."

Page 102, Its a wonderful thing ==> It's a wonderful thing

Page 109, aimiable ==> amiable

Page 118, repertoire ==> repertoire

Page 124, "'Madam,' says I ==> "'Madam,' says I

Page 125, may I ask?" she ==> may I ask?' she

Page 139, guage ==> gauge

Page 147, naivette ==> naiveté

Page 156, rosegardens ==> rose-gardens [Ed. for consistency]

Page 157, it's not not in ==> it's not in

Page 180, exquisitively ==> exquisitely

Page 186, Brooks ==> Brook [Ed. for consistency]

Page 201, CHAPTER XIV. ==> CHAPTER XVI.
Page 209, recital, "That caused ==> recital, "that caused
Page 249, maganimity ==> magnanimity
Page 264, play you're silly ==> play your silly
Page 264, And you're argument ==> And your argument
Page 264, irresistible ==> irresistible
Page 264, sharp, aren't you? ==> sharp, aren't you?
Page 306, ecstacy ==> ecstasy
Page 315, phospherescent ==> phosphorescent

[The end of *Neighbours* by Robert Stead]