THE STONE FIELD

Martha Ostenso

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MARTHA OSTENSO

WILD GEESE

THE DARK DAWN

THE MAD CAREWS

PROLOGUE TO LOVE

THE YOUNG MAY MOON

THE WATERS UNDER THE EARTH

THERE'S ALWAYS ANOTHER YEAR

THE WHITE REEF

MARTHA OSTENSO

The STONE FIELD

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Part One

JO PORTE

Chapter One

1

After the night of rain, a smallish, wan sun was struggling through wool tatters of cloud. Jo wondered if it would be possible now to see the Stately Mansion if she climbed to the top of the big pine on the ridge back of the barn. She had not been up there since one glittering late afternoon in February when the windows of the Stately Mansion had reflected the setting sun in a trance of wild, pure fire.

She gave a careless glance back at the house, then made her way to the rear of the barn and up the hill. Her mother had lately objected that she was becoming too big a girl to climb trees, and anyhow because the Hartley women were delicately formed she might suffer a strain. But Jo Porte did not think of herself as a Hartley woman.

The first big limb of the Norway was still there, although her mother had ordered Ned Larkin, the hired man, to lop it off so that Jo might more easily remember that she was not a boy. Jo swung herself rapidly aloft, the great round shags of needles shaking drops down upon her as she climbed. Every year it was becoming more perilous, this airy island above the forest sea, and today prudence checked her before she was more than halfway to the top. She crouched disconsolately down on a stout branch and clung to the rough, rosily patterned bark. Even here she could look out over the land. The moan of the huge pine which came, she had long been certain, not from the wind in its branches but from its true, sturdy heart, was too familiar to her to be any distraction.

All the world known to her in any deep measure—the town was not yet of it—lay spread out below, beyond the casement made by the branches of the tree. Now, before the leaves came to the hardwoods, the cabins and huddled barns of the settlers all along the lake shore were visible, from beyond Spite Island and the scurfy ice plain on the east to the steel-blue rim of open water on the north circle. The Vandermeyers', Toufangs', Torkelsons', were there, and farther back in the sooty spring brushwood,

unseen but known, were the farmsteads of the Dibneys and the Matthewses. And yonder, in the fold of a dark ravine, hidden from view, stood the awesome stone house of old man Baggott, who kept his fierce pack of black dogs chained except on certain nights when his mischievous fancy chose to let them roam the countryside. Southwest, the world slipped into the Owl Country, a junglelike region of pine and hardwood and swamp underbrush not to be thought of by most people, especially at night, except with fear. But the headland south and east, level now with her sight across the cove and through the torn and lightened space of air, rose prideful and aloof from all else that had been tracked down through her childhood and made common.

Jo's gaze fixed itself upon that headland and the great house that stood up to view there among the trees. It was only in the spring last gone that she had come to know, from *The Chambered Nautilus*, the true name of the Hilyard house. Her discovery had gone out on wings, across the lake, to alight unknown upon that towerlike gable that thrust itself upward from the corner nearest the lake. *Build thee more stately mansions, O my soul!* With no other had she shared the luminous secret.

The sun emerged, an uneasy, watery disk, and feebly irradiated the green roof of the Stately Mansion. It was something to be able to see it at all. The Lombardy poplars which rose high about it would in a few weeks be a tableau of pale green torches against the sky. Now they were merely phantom etchings in rain gone over. The windmill, the silo, the enormous gambrel-roofed barn and the other structures on Sky Valley Farm Jo always preferred to ignore. What did it matter if their like was to be found nowhere else in the northern part of the state? There should be nothing so prosaic and useful as farm buildings anywhere within view of the Stately Mansion, however costly and fine they might be.

By half closing her eyes Jo could see every room in the house—and could furnish each in the breath-taking splendor of her own fancy. The thought that she might some day actually enter the house itself was too terrifyingly thrilling to bear. Why, it was all white and high, with a round turret standing out toward the Point where anybody on the south shore could see sunrise and sunset!

The nearest she had ever been to its door was when she waited in the buggy while her father went in to pay Mr. Hilyard the year's rent on the Porte farm—before the Portes bought their land, that was—or to talk about the building of a new fence about the pasture, or the draining of the low land that lay just back of the hill. It was always Mr. Leonard Hilyard her father

dealt with now, though Jo could remember when it was old Ashbrooke Hilyard who took care of such things. Jo never saw the old man now. It was said that he hadn't left his room for more than three years. But she had wondered much about him and wished she might steal into the house by some secret door, find the stairway to the old man's room, and sit before him again while he talked, as he used to talk when he visited the Portes, of the early days and the rugged years when hardy men and women came to live upon the land and accepted its hazards and defeats along with its victories.

Mr. Leonard Hilyard seldom talked of such things, it seemed, and only on rare occasions went about among the neighbors. His tenants came to him if they had anything to talk about. And yet he was a pleasant man and had a kindly way. People said he might be more like his father, old Ashbrooke, if he hadn't married Alda Tate, whose father had been Doctor Tate of Carthia. But there was no way of telling about such things. That had happened long before Jo was born, before the Portes came north at all, and the three Hilyard children were older than Jo.

She would never forget the last time she had waited outside the Hilyard door. Especially would she never forget how her father looked when he came out upon the porch with Mr. Leonard Hilyard and stood there in the bare sun, with his high stiff collar on a little to one side, and his best suit, cigar-brown, baggy in the seat as if he had stolen something while he was in the house. He had stood wagging his hat airily and chatting with Mr. Hilyard for all the world as though they were just neighbors, and then he had spoiled it all by giving a little jerk of a bow at the moment he said good-by. What made it worse was that Mr. Hilyard, gray-haired and upstanding in flannel shirt and corduroy breeches, with high boots, had given a genial salute with his palm spread outward from his temple.

Jo had squirmed, but when her father got into the buggy and picked up the reins he cleared his throat importantly and said, "One of the world's gentlemen—Mr. Hilyard!"

Thereupon Jo had glanced at her father furtively and had seen again how proud and fine his profile was. He was every bit as good a man as Leonard Hilyard, even if he didn't have any money and had to rent a farm to live on.

"What room were you in, Pa?" Jo asked breathlessly.

His reply had been careless, offhand: "The study, as usual." You might almost have thought he entered it every week instead of once or twice a year!

He had given old Duke a light touch of the whip then with a flourish as they departed down the rich gloom of the "avenue" where great elms interwove overhead. Jo had glanced back at the Lombardy poplars standing as if on guard about the house. The house and buildings were in a slight depression on the rise of land, and from this had come the name "Sky Valley." At the stone-pillared gate her father had been obliged to draw sharply to one side, for through it came at a mad gallop two boys and a girl mounted on shining black horses. Jo had gripped the side of the buggy and craned back at them as they flashed by, for it was not often one caught a glimpse of the Hilyard children—Royce and young Ashbrooke and Dorothy. They were always away at school or at summer camps or traveling with their mother on visits to relatives in a place they called "the East." They spent so little time at home that Jo had always pitied them, had never felt toward them any jealousy. The Stately Mansion was her own, her very own, in a way that they would not discover, probably, as long as they lived.

The tree swayed in the rising wind and Jo began to feel cramped and cold. Cloud shadows moved like wild, slate-colored islands over the lake. And now from the house her mother was calling in that voice of hers that put shame on any dreaming.

Jo frowned as she emerged into the open farmyard on the lake shore. Ned Larkin, the hired man, had said something only last week about her growing pretty. But that was just more of his tormenting. She knew better. Her eyes were still olive green, darker like smoke only around the iris, and never would be either pansy-colored or velvet brown like certain caterpillars. Her hair, which until a year or two ago had been white as bleached straw, was now the distressing shade of newly sawed logs. Her nose was flat and short and already this spring was liberally sprinkled with cinnamon. Her mouth was the only feature in which she could see any promise of beauty, although she did have to keep it tucked in to look anything like the lovely ladies on calendars or in the Sears, Roebuck catalogs. As for her arms and legs, they just went where they wanted to, no matter what graceful attitudes she practiced in front of the dresser mirror in her mother's room. Even now it stung her to recall what Phoebe Dibney had said at school last winter: "Tall girls are admired, but little girls are loved."

She gave a hot, angry gasp of resentment at everything and ran past the soggy manure pile beside the log stable toward the squat, whitewashed log house on the lake shore. There her indignant retrospection immediately vanished. A stormy, broken clamor rose from the dark ribbon of open water between the beach and the smoke-blue, porous mat of ice which still lay

over most of Fallen Star Lake. Jo pressed her hands hard against her chest. Always the coming of the wild ducks made her feel so—as if something were escaping from within herself to that shrill, swift-winged turmoil that came from the unknown and vanished into the unknown again. Blue-hills, mallards and butterballs by the hundreds skimmed, settled, or dove, to rise once more with a muted scream of joy or ancient fear and to etch for an instant their brief black crosses against the leaden sky. She could not bear watching them for long. She turned quickly toward the house, the bedraggled Rhode Island reds scattering before her.

The cove, this house, and the steep, nobly treed hill back of it were all known to her beyond mere thinking and feeling. Their very familiarity irked her at times and drove her to climb among the branches of the tall Norway pine for a fleeting glimpse of that other world. Her father had told her that she was too young to know that other worlds can irk you too and send you back to the familiar and homely things with a deep sense of peace and comfort restored, but that telling had seemed to her very dull.

Jo had been barely a year old when she had come to this house with her mother from Grandfather Hartley's farm in the southern part of the state. Her father had built it himself—a kitchen and one moderate room for sleeping and living in it was then—and had had it in readiness for the arrival of his family. It was as if Jo herself could remember their coming, so many times had her mother recounted the event. They had drawn up to the cabin in a surrey with tassels hanging from the roof, an equipage her father had grandly hired for a dollar, and her mother, glancing about her in a dazed way, had moaned, "Gracious me, Ernest! Is this only northern Minnesota? It looks to me like a wilderness! Where are the fields?"

Jo's father had laughed and lifted her mother down from the surrey and carried her across the threshold of the sweet-smelling, new log house. That was thirteen years ago and in all that time her mother had only once returned to her home in the south. That had been when Grandfather Hartley had died. Jo could not recall her father ever lifting her mother across the threshold again, either. Some things, like that and funerals, had a way of happening only once, it seemed.

The cabin door opened and a dishpanful of water tossed a fleet, glistening arc over the empty flower bed beneath the kitchen window.

"Jobina! Where on earth have you been? Don't you know it's noon nearly? Ned'll be in before we know it—and the table not set! Here—fetch me a pail of water before you come in. And come in by the side door. I've

just mopped up. Hurry, now! I declare I don't know where you keep yourself half the time."

Jo sauntered toward the well, swinging the pail and thinking hard. Why did her mother always yell like that, as if she were a mile away? It was bad enough when you were alone, but if someone happened to walk home from school with you . . . It made Jo twist inside. And yet there was something awfully sad about her mother's voice, too, as if a bird that had once had a sweet song had got caught in her throat and was strangling there. Jo could remember when that voice had been like a lullaby, even in ordinary speech. And why should her mother be so eager to have things ready when Ned Larkin came in from the fields? He was only a "transient" who had been coming and going with the seasons ever since Jo could remember. Even when he might have got work somewhere else he would stay on for weeks at the Portes', puttering about simply for his board and room as if he were a relative. Her mother even made macaroni and cheese once a week because it was Ned Larkin's favorite dish, although her father detested it.

There was something the matter with her mother; something more than a singing bird caught in her throat. But how could anyone only fourteen years old find out what it was?

2

Ned Larkin hung the towel in its place above the wash basin. "Erne's back from town, I see," he announced as he began to brush his sandy hair back from his glistening forehead.

"He's early. Put another plate down for your pa," Jo's mother ordered mechanically.

"I seen him comin' in the gate just now," Ned added. "Guess he didn't get to see Hilyard about them seed oats he was gettin'. I'll have that east thirty plowed by the end o' next week."

"Well, sit in, anyhow. I expect you're starved."

"I could eat all right. This raw weather makes an appetite when you're workin'. If it don't pick up soon, things is goin' to be backward." Ned drew a chair and seated himself.

“This is the last of the salt pork,” said Jo’s mother. Streaks of the original gold rim were still discernible on the platter she set on the table.

“We’ll eat cake, then, as the Queen o’ Sheba said to the Czar of Russia.”

“It wasn’t the Queen of Sheba,” Jo corrected as she set a knife and fork beside her father’s place.

“Bring the gravy, Jo,” her mother said peremptorily, then smiled at Ned Larkin. “I don’t know where you pick up half the things you say.”

Ned lifted his brows and pursed his lips. “Oh, I been around, Mabel. There’s a heap o’ education in travel.”

The door opened and Jo’s father came in. “Well—just in time, eh?”

“We’re waitin’ for you, Erne,” Ned replied as he reached for the bowl of potatoes.

In a moment they were all at the table.

“That’s the last of the salt pork,” Jo’s mother announced again.

Jo gazed past her mother’s flushed face to the whitewashed wall on which hung a calendar with the figure of Pocahontas a-dream over a forest pool. Beside it was a reproduction of “The Age of Innocence,” which her mother had cut from a magazine and had had framed and glassed in town for fifty cents.

Then she turned to her father and saw him looking at the gravy beside Ned’s plate. Ned had taken four or five potatoes and a good deal of gravy. Ernest Porte took two potatoes slowly, as if he were counting them, and then a spoonful of the white gravy.

“Well, let’s eat hearty!” he urged with a dry twinkle at Jo. “We won’t have meat of any sort for a spell now with the venison gone, unless Ma can spare us a chicken.”

Ned bent a fervent look upon the platter of salt pork before he took it into his hands. His eyes met Jo’s mother’s across the table. He brushed back a damp, sandy lock from his sloping forehead and said, “You first, Mabel!”

Jo’s mother protested nicely, shrugging her high, thin shoulders. “You know I’m sick to death of the stuff, Ned. You and Ernest eat it. I fried those eggs for Jo and me.”

She was too old to blush, Jo thought—thirty-nine—and yet she *was* blushing. Over a platter of salt pork! The blush seemed to pass up to her

blue eyes and into her smoothly parted dark hair. For the first time, Jo saw threads of gray in those neat strands.

The mean little moment of anxiety about food passed, as it always did, leaving everybody looking smaller afterwards, and the low room narrower. Jo's father shook his shoulders as if he were trying to get into some sort of freedom from everything, and Ned Larkin slid three slices of the crisply fried pork to his plate.

"Did you get in to see Hilyard?" Ned asked.

"No, but I saw Royce in town. He says the seed oats'll be ready for us when we're ready for them."

"Is Royce back from school, then?" Jo's mother asked.

"Hm-m—him and young Ash. Back for the Easter holidays, I expect. They were in showin' off that new red car they got—Dorothy was with 'em, too."

"You were talking to Royce?"

"Sure! He came halfway across the street and shook hands with me like I was an old friend of his. Well, I guess I am, too, in a way. He don't forget the time I found him hollerin' his head off down there in the Owl Country—been lost in the peat bog a good hour before I found him—and took him home to his mammy. Though she never as much as said, 'Thank you!' The Tates were always a bit uppish, except the old doc. And I guess Alda was the worst of the lot."

"She can afford to be," Jo's mother observed acidly.

"I s'pose she can, but—well, sakes alive, Mabel, it takes all kinds to make a world. You can't say Len is uppish."

Her father seldom spoke of Mr. Leonard Hilyard as "Len," Jo thought with a running thrill. It seemed to bring the Stately Mansion so intimately near that it was almost not decent.

"He must have been when he picked Alda Tate for a wife," Jo's mother retorted. "And the three brats she brought into the world are worse than she is—with their going away to school and college. As if the schools in Carthia weren't good enough for them."

"Well, there's no accountin' for a man's taste in women, I guess. I might 'a' married Alda Tate myself if I'd got here ten years sooner. What's more, the older I get the more I realize there's a lot o' guesswork in breedin'. More

in humans than in cattle, too. With two like Len Hilyard and Alda Tate, there's no telling which way the strain will run. Dorothy is like her mother, young Ashbrooke isn't like either of them, but Royce is a fine, upstandin' young fellow, gettin' to be. More like his dad every year. He has the makin's of a good man if he don't get too many fool notions out of goin' to college —and if he don't marry some scatterbrain of a woman."

"There's time enough for that," Jo's mother remarked.

"Well, he's—let's see—Royce'll be twenty-two come August. I remember because once when he was a kid his father bought him a Shetland pony for his birthday and I was along. Won't be long before he's lookin' round. But, gosh, I came near forgettin'. They're givin' an Easter party for the kids around the lake. They want Jo."

Jo looked up quickly.

"Who's giving an Easter party?" her mother asked.

"Why, the Hilyards, of course. They're askin' the neighbors' kids over tomorrow afternoon."

Jo's hands throbbed where she pressed them together under the table. It was unbelievable.

"About four o'clock, Royce said," her father added.

"Must be something funny about that," Ned Larkin spoke up. "First time in all the years I been around here that any of the Hilyard tribe has put themselves out for—"

"What difference does that make, Ned?" Jo's father put in. "Let the kids go and have a good time. Can't come any harm out of that, far as I can see. We're neighbors, ain't we?"

"Like hell!" Ned sneered. "We're as far apart as the Medes and the Persians. But it'll probably be rainin' pitchforks by tomorrow and—"

Jo winced. "It won't! And if it does I'll go anyhow! I've never seen the inside of their house."

Her mother turned sharply. "There you go! What good will it do you to see the inside of the Hilyard house? I'd like to know. It isn't as grand as all that. Mrs. Vandermeyer was there once and she ought to know. The Vandermeyers had plenty of money before they lost it and had to come up here to live."

“Sakes, Mabel—let the child be! If she wants to see the inside of the place, let her. It can’t hurt her to have a look at how other folks live.”

Jo’s mother sighed resignedly. “I’m not saying against it, I’m sure. But it won’t do her any good getting ideas.”

What might have come of the argument Jo was never to know. From behind the stove came Bounce, the venerable collie who was just Jo’s age. He was at the door, barking gruffly, his neck ruff bristling with a show of anger, but his great plume of a tail wagging.

“There’s Brade Toufang and Tom Matthews,” Jo’s mother announced, looking from the window. “I wonder what they’re after.”

There was a scraping of chairs away from the table and Jo’s father went to the door.

3

They were men with a surface hardness baked upon them by the brief, fierce suns of northern summers, frozen upon them by the cold of winters legend-long. But beneath their weathering they were ordinary men, likable or unlikable in part, sensitive or dull to the impact of life upon them—as ordinary as the very rich, the very poor, the unimportant, and the chance great.

Brade Toufang and Tom Matthews, tenant brush farmers on the Hilyard tract, had been sitting for the better part of an hour in the whitewashed kitchen while Jo and her mother went about their housework. Beyond the windows the early spring afternoon scudded gray and wet. It had reached into the kitchen with a long, chilling hand, and neither the brisk wood fire in the range nor Mrs. Porte’s good coffee and doughnuts had been able to prevent its touching the shoulder of each of the men seated there.

Jo had finally crouched to the floor beside the wood-box, listening to the talk between her father and the neighbor men and running her hand through the silky mane of old Bounce. Now that she was fourteen she could understand in some measure what it was these men wanted, for she had heard the insistent chant of it ever since she was ten, the year the war came to an end.

She had heard the story over and over—of how old Ashbrooke Hilyard had bought all the land about Fallen Star Lake in the rough days, of how his land hunger had forced other settlers from their holdings, of how his ambition had later given way to a different sort of impulse when he had promoted the Eden Enterprise and had brought in new settlers to work the land at a nominal rental, since he could till only a part of it himself. He had even allotted Phineas Baggott a few acres where he could live out his days—old man Baggott, from whom he had taken two full sections of good woodland by involvement in debts of one kind or another that were never paid when they fell due. Jo had heard it all, times without number, and was growing tired of it now. She had heard how her father, alone among the settlers, had prevailed upon Ashbrooke Hilyard to sell him the eighty acres he had been renting. But then Ernest Porte had somehow had the cash in hand, and old Ashbrooke, for some reason, had always favored Ernest above the others. Now the talk was, as usual, about the desire of the other settlers to gain title to the acres they had turned for so many years and for which they had paid annual tribute to the Hilyards who stubbornly refused to sell. Of late Jo had begun to feel that Brade Toufang and Tom Matthews and their like had no right to own land. It took a man like old Ashbrooke Hilyard, however hard he might be, to give dignity and meaning to the soil. It seemed like a sacred heritage from the past, and a man must be something more than common to merit it.

And yet she knew, she *felt*, something of what these others had given to the land and were giving to it still. They seldom spoke of it except to curse it and to complain, bewailing their lot from year to year, but they were of it nonetheless and would never get away from it. The years might bring their ups and downs and the seasons their changes, but once a man had thrust his hands into the soil and knew the grit of it between his teeth, he felt something rise within him that was not of his day or generation, but had persisted through birth and death from a time beyond recall.

These things Jo understood vaguely, though they always seemed to escape her understanding just when she was on the point of grasping them. It was like looking at the outer rim of a rainbow. If you looked intently enough you could almost *feel* the violet hues that eluded the eye. It was while men talked of such things, however haltingly, that she could sit and listen. But when they turned to figures, so and so much an acre and so and so much for taxes, Jo stopped her ears. If there had been other women here besides her mother, there would have been fascinating conversation about the Hilyards themselves, so that her inner dream of them would glow and darken excitingly moment by moment. But there was little to be gained from

listening to the talk of men. She patted the head of old Bounce, who labored to his feet as she stood up.

"If you're going out, Jobina," her mother called from the pantry, "put your jacket on. It's raw."

Jo took her knitted red tam and her old black and red plaid mackinaw down from the hook beside the kitchen door.

What if the skies were gray and threatening and the wind chill? Tomorrow she would walk within the Stately Mansion.

Chapter Two

1

The eastern sky was still only mourning-dove color, but Jo had lain awake for a long time and had been alert with all her body to the venturing first bird notes before dawn because every note brought the full day more near.

Little matter to the Portes that this was Easter Sunday. They thought that boarding the itinerant Bible student for a month during the summer free of charge, so that all the children on the north shore might learn religion, released them from further obligation so far as spiritual affairs were concerned. Her father would spend until mid-afternoon repairing the barn, where it was raining through, and Ned Larkin would be out to finish plowing what he could of the oat field.

Jo reached up back of her head and pushed her long fingers against the kalsomined logs of the wall. Pretty soon, her father often said, if she kept on growing she would be too tall even to sleep in the "attic," let alone stand up straight in it. It was really no attic at all. It was only the space beneath the ridgepole and above the kitchen ceiling, a long, narrow slot between two gables. But they had managed to put a window in at each end and had made it a proper room for Jo when she was nine years old, too old to sleep in the trundle bed downstairs.

Her bedstead was a narrow brass affair which her father had triumphantly brought home from an auction in the street market in Carthia. Jo could remember his saying then, "Since you can't have any more, Mabel, we ought to do our best by Jo." She had supposed he meant beds and she had been terribly grateful. A golden knob was missing from a corner post, and when she unscrewed the other three she had found in one of them a dry and sordid wad of gum. Besides the bed, there was a homemade pine stand with pink flowered cretonne flounced about it and a stool painted a light blue.

Jo sat up and slid her feet down to the small strip of rag carpet beside her bed. Of course, on this day of all days, there wouldn't be a squeak of life downstairs when she was so vividly awake she couldn't bear another second of it!

In her striped flannel nightdress she walked over to the window. The cold, scrubbed pine boards made her toes turn up erect all by themselves, like little separate people. The storm window was still on, but through the diamond-shaped opening at the bottom she could hear the robin in the birch tree outside juggling his iridescent bubbles of song. And when he plunged down from the tree with the rusty flame of his breast forward, not sweeping and elusive as later birds, she thought how *known* he was, how lavishly given, and wondered if this made him more dear or less. The orioles and tanagers, even when you saw them full on, were hidden in a secret of sunlight. It was difficult to decide which bird she would choose to be if the choice were offered her. But in her heart she felt somehow that the robin was more like her true self and that she would be putting on airs if she elected to change into one of the more gorgeous birds.

Across the lake now, beyond the squat turtleback of Spite Island, rose the sun, a vast, wet, ominous ruby. Then it meant to rain today after all, Jo thought with rebellious indignation. You could always tell when there was that limpid hush at dawn, as if the sun were trailing diaphanous veils, and suddenly at its rising the birds were still. She looked southward, past Crane Island, which was yet only a threaded, silvery promontory of poplars with here and there the changeless dark of a pine ascending. Around the blunt nose of Crane Island was the Hilyards' beach, not to be seen from Jo's window. If the ice, glowing from blue to lavender and transparent rose now, were only off the lake, she might take the boat and row across. As it was, she knew only too well there would be nothing for it but to walk the three miles around the end of the lake, rain or no rain. It would be too much to expect her father to take the team off the field even for an hour or so.

The water in the blue enamelware pitcher was numbingly cold to her hands and face, but this was only a wake-up wash anyhow, since last night she had had a warm bath in the wooden tub downstairs in front of the kitchen range. Her mother had washed her hair, too, adding vinegar to the rinsing water, so that it gleamed like pale shot silk, not with an even lightness. Perhaps in a few years it would not remind anybody of sawed pine. Perhaps it would be a shining amber or a lustrous, romantic chestnut, she dared to think while she parted it carefully on one side and pinned it

back with the butterfly barrette Goldy Matthews had given her for Christmas.

Although it was no problem to choose the dress she would wear to enter the Stately Mansion, since only the blue serge with the red sailor collar had whole elbows, Jo nevertheless stood for some minutes before the rack where her clothes hung with a pensive finger pressed against her lip. It was fun to pretend that there were a dozen lovely creations waiting there, frilled and laced and enchantingly hued. It wasn't hard even to imagine that the blue serge was sapphire velvet with a little collar, very white and soft and embroidered for the neck.

But there would be work to do before she could give herself wholly to such vain fancies. She slipped quickly into her old flannel bloomers, the heavy brown skirt made over from a cast-off of her mother's, and the middy blouse that was too short in the sleeves.

2

By mid-morning a rain as fine as silk spills was weaving over the lake. Nevertheless, Ned Larkin must have his snack brought to him in the field. Jo held the coffee pail and the bag of doughnuts before her as she picked her way carefully along the narrow path among the trees. She glanced down at her knobby knees in their thick brown stockings. In a few weeks she would be able to go barefoot again, and in some way she did not look so dreadfully leggy then. Dorothy Hilyard, she knew, would have round, dimpled knees without knobs.

The sun stepped out for an instant in clear surprise. It was miraculous how the bare woods twinkled now and how the flakes of mica on the stones along the shore shone like fish scales in the light. The wind blew off the lake on a strong, straight plane and there was a whistling of wings overhead and a linked, metallic crying. Jo felt them pass over her, the straining bodies, all a-shine and racing the wind. She closed her eyes and stood for a moment quietly sensing the wild, high drift of them. Then she moved quickly toward the field's edge, away from the lake.

The oat field lay dark and soft from the morning's rain. Jo stepped carefully across the newly turned clods to meet the team as it swung back from the east fence. Ned drew rein sharply at sight of her and swung his short, bowed legs down from the sulky plow.

“Didn’t I tell you it was goin’ to rain today?” he said as he took the coffee pail from Jo’s hand.

She threw back her head in wrath. “You’ve been wanting it to rain!”

“It don’t matter to me what it does. I got my work to do, rain or shine. I s’pose my lady’s chaw-fer is takin’ you to the grand swa-ree! What you got in that paper bag?”

Jo was suddenly inarticulate with rage. She took a firm grip on the bag of doughnuts and hurled them with all her might at Ned Larkin’s grinning face. Then she turned and flashed away from him, bounding like a fawn over the moist furrows. Ned was after her in a twinkling. She would easily have cleared the distance to the red oak woods had her heavy brown skirt not chosen this unhappy moment to spring from its hook and tangle itself about her ankles. She fell headlong in a raging, chagrined heap. Ned was upon her at once with a roar of triumphant laughter, but she kicked out at him with wild, pink-bloomered legs.

He sat back on his heels and laughed. “A reg’lar little hell-cat you’re gettin’ to be, and no mistake!”

Then his gaze narrowed as he looked across at the girl. Her eyes were flaming, her cheeks rippling with furious color. She tugged at her skirt to hitch it up about her waist before she started to rise.

“Mad like that, you’re a right smart of a piece already!” Ned remarked soberly. “Growin’ up—that’s what, by golly! But you don’t have to be scared of your pants because of me. I changed ’em for you when they was only squares of flannel.”

Jo was on her feet at last and marching with what dignity she could muster toward the red oaks in tight, reluctant bud. She stoutly resisted a backward glance. Ned would no doubt be picking up the doughnuts and eating them, dirt and all.

The shabby bronze of last year’s few remaining leaves glistened darkly as she walked through the oak woods. There was a cautious rustle along the branches, as if the leaves knew that the rain and sun were not meant for them, the old, and their brittleness would not long withstand those purposeful thrusts. Mingled with the red oaks were clusters of white birch, standing straight and clean and naked in a look of tiptoe expectancy, their buds still fast and secret. Jo scuffed up the damp, loose mold of leaf and grass and breathed in the sad, sweet smell. This was a more achingly lovely time than any—these days between winter and full spring—because now

you could not be sure that all the things that were waiting to live would ever be born, or would just drift forever in rain or sun like poor ghosts the earth hadn't wanted. Here and there a bloodroot or a hepatica rose bravely out of the dark, rich ply of decay, but she had never been able to think of them as anything but frail spirits left by the snow. It might be long yet before the woods were studded blue with violets if you were to believe the prediction of Ned Larkin, for instance.

Suddenly, as she emerged again upon the border of the field, her eyes fell upon a torn place in the shallow ledge. She knelt and carefully drew aside the brittle fringe of last year's weeds, and there, snugly cradled against the weather, lay five newborn rabbits. Their tiny, gray-brown bodies, not more than two inches long, were huddled closely together, their slanting eyes mere stitches in their little, old-gnome faces, their ears flat sheaths across the length of their backs. Although Jo held her breath in an effort not to startle them, a quiver of alarm seemed to pass like a bubble from one small shape to another. The little noses and cleft lips twitched apprehensively, the ridiculous ears wavered upward, ungainly and pitiful.

"Poor babies!" Jo whispered, and stepped gently back from them. Perhaps the mother was lurking somewhere near, watching with panic-strained eyes. Quietly Jo stole away. It was an omen of good luck to find rabbits on an Easter Sunday.

3

The hours had seemed endless with waiting, but Jo was on her way at last. The clock in the kitchen stood at three when she had taken her coat from its hook and her red wool tam that always sagged on the back of her neck after she had walked a little way. Her mother's last admonition had fallen between rebuke and lament. "See that you get back before dark. Pa's expecting Aggie to freshen any minute and she's not been acting right. I might have to help him, and you'll have to make supper." She had hung the dishpan with a clatter on its nail above the wood-box and Jo had gone out without a word.

In deep summer this road around Fallen Star Lake humped and twisted like a long bright and dark serpent through the lush, sun-dappled tunnel of hardwoods and evergreens. But now, before elm and oak and poplar and

birch were in leaf, it seemed naked and forlorn, exposed to the sky—a little sandy road only on which humble people came and went.

Jo walked with a hurry in her shoulders, for whenever she glanced up the clouds hung lower and more sullen above the bare trees. She hoped, with a twinge of disloyalty, that Goldy Matthews would not be waiting for her. She wanted to walk alone, to let her thoughts dwell upon what awaited her, to shake herself free from the sound of her mother's talking, fast and sharp, that made Jo's spine creep.

But at the end of a mile there was Goldy, seated beside a clump of dwarf sumac, wearing her brother's ragged old gray sweater. Her little moon of a face brightened as Jo came around the bend in the road. She stood up and began clapping her hands. Against the still winy velvet of last year's panicles on the sumac, her bare head was colorless and drab. Jo had often wondered how anyone could turn out so different from her name. Only her eyes had a soft, waiting radiance in them, as if she expected some day to have something lovely happen to her. Goldy was sixteen, but to Jo she had always seemed younger than herself, perhaps because of her fear of everything—lightning, climbing trees, Baggott's dogs.

"I've been waiting for you!" Goldy exclaimed. "Ma won't let me go to the Hilyards' because I haven't any clothes. But she let me make fudge out o' some maple sap we got—and Toofy had kittens last night—in the barn—and I want you to come up right now and see them."

Jo felt the miserable red dusting over her freckles. She glanced up the slope where the two-roomed slab shack of the Matthewses stood among the lofty white pines. The shack was edged and roofed in green and carried a jauntily sylvan air that moved summer visitors to remark, "How quaint!"

"I can't stay, Goldy," Jo faltered. "I'll only have a little while at the Hilyards' because I've got to be home to make supper."

Tears of disappointment came into Goldy's eyes, and Jo looked sternly away.

"You oughtn't to go to their place," Goldy said in a strange tone. "Baggott's pack was running again last night."

Jo looked at her, and the shiver she felt made her suddenly furious. Old Baggott's pack of crazy dogs—what had they to do with her? Her father often said it made him laugh the way people on the north shore acted when those dogs went baying through the woods. Her mother thought there might

be something to it, however. Remember the time Karsten Borg was drowned out fishing the dawn after the pack had been running?

"I'm not afraid of Baggott's pack!" Jo said stoutly.

Goldy uttered a feeble gasp. "They'd tear you to pieces if you met them!"

"Anyhow, I've got to go," Jo replied, her eyes stubborn. It had already started to sprinkle again and she had two miles still to go—and through the Owl Country besides. She hastily said good-by and set off down the road at a brisk pace.

The Owl Country was a gray, webby tangle of old vines among gaunt branches now, with an occasional evergreen interspersed, an uncouth place with little to inspire either awe or fear. Even the fine rain knitting through it made it only half mysterious, melancholy and unimportant as a ghost in daylight, Jo told herself. It was the bony look of the giant poplars that made her run.

Her wet tam sloped away from her high forehead and down about her ears. Wet gravel had got in through the lacings of her shoes and her feet itched, hot and cold. But the stone pillars of the Hilyard gate rose before her, higher and more overwhelming even than when you drove through them. The gate was open, and beyond it through the bare trees she could see the white frame house with its stonework base, its cupola, and its porch that had four thick white pillars. At a dignified distance from the house, and separated from it by gardens and an orchard, were blurred masses of outbuildings, barns, and pens.

Even now she could turn and run home, she thought to herself, but that would be shameful cowardice, and she would have nothing to tell Goldy Matthews. Her heart throbbed to bursting as she entered the gate and walked in the precise middle of the driveway, head high but with each foot heavy as a sadiron, up the steps and across the porch.

On the door, which looked square for all its height, there was a brass thing hanging—the thing she had seen from the driveway when she had come here with her father. It was shaped like a horseshoe, with an "H" in the middle of the curve near the bottom. Jo wondered why it wasn't screwed down tight instead of hanging loose from the top. Clenching her teeth, she knocked on the door with her chapped knuckles.

A fat, pink-cheeked young woman, with hair braided about her head, opened the door. She wore a white apron.

“How do you do,” Jo said politely in a voice that was very small.

She was being looked up and down in a disconcerting manner. There was a wild fluttering somewhere inside her.

“You got plenty vet,” said the girl. “Better kom in first vit’ me to de kitchen and get dry.”

Before Jo followed her into the narrow passage to the left, she got a full glimpse of the entrance hall. Its floor seemed to her a lake darkly shining. The white balustrade of a staircase wound up from it, but to Jo it was an immaculate waterfall gliding down into a lustrous pool. In a yet unfolded time, when she—and the staircase—were to have known strange years passing, Jo was still to see it clearly in this way, undimmed and proud, through the strong flow of memory.

4

Everything in the last ten minutes had passed as in a stiff, dazzling dream. Jo wondered if her clothing were still steaming from the heat of the great kitchen range in front of which she had stood obediently drying out until Dorothy had come. The woman in the white glossy apron was somebody by the name of Hedvig, and from the way Dorothy spoke to her she must have been the hired girl.

Dorothy had a luscious look, her skin was very rosy and rich, her gleaming curls dark and arranged with a fine care alien to the mean stringiness that went with poverty. Jo was trembling, hot and cold darts shooting up and down all over her.

“Your eyes are funny, aren’t they?” Dorothy observed bluntly. “I mean—their color. My father has a ring almost that color. It’s a moss agate. I hate brown eyes like mine. Royce and Ash have blue eyes. How old are you?”

Jo gazed at her with unrelaxed suspicion, but soon the lure of exchanging ages became too strong. “I’m fourteen,” she said briefly.

“Why, I’m fifteen, and you’re bigger than I am! When’s your birthday?”

“February seventeenth.”

“You’re a winter baby. Milledge says winter babies never have cold feet. She means they’re never scared of anything. All of us are summer babies.”

“What are you scared of?” Jo asked with reluctant curiosity.

“We don’t know yet. Milledge says time will tell.”

“Who’s Milledge?” Jo demanded stiffly.

“She was our nurse when we were small. Now she’s my governess when I’m home from school. She teaches me music—and so forth.”

Governess! The only governess Jo had ever heard of was Becky Sharp in *Vanity Fair*.

Voices of Dorothy’s young guests came from another part of the house, but Dorothy showed no concern. “If you’re dry now, we’ll go up and see Grandpa before we go to the living room. He told me to be sure to bring you to see him when you came. He remembers you. We’ll go through the parlor and up the back stairway.”

Dorothy opened a door, and Jo gazed into a space opaque and mellow with late day sunlight after rain. There was here the loneliness of the unused—blinds half drawn, the level rays of the sun paneling dusty bright across heavy knobbed mahogany furniture.

Dorothy closed the door behind them. She walked casually out upon a carpet the like of which Jo had only seen pictured in the mail order catalog.

Forgetting for an instant her dislike of the imperious Dorothy, Jo said breathlessly, “This is the loveliest house I ever saw!”

“Lovely?” Dorothy halted and stared incredulously. “Royce says it’s a—an atrocity! He knows about architecture, and so forth. He says the tower and everything is just too *horrible*! It was Grandpa’s idea when he built it, but Mamma says it’s a fright because it isn’t any *period* at all.” Jo was now feeling bewilderment and pain. “But you can come over here and look into the china closet,” Dorothy added, and then with a glance at Jo’s feet, “—only don’t step on the roses.”

Jo looked fearfully down at the carpet. There was a profusion of cream-colored, mammoth blooms on a background that was the shade of purplish petunias just before dusk. Jo tiptoed gingerly across to where Dorothy was standing, but because of her anxiety about the roses she was never to remember what she saw in the china closet.

After that they climbed a back stairway to a room that smelled of camphor and tobacco, the two odors violently embattled. In the purged golden light from the west windows Jo saw the clutter of furnishings rise as

if to assault her, and then all at once the sharp beak of a very old man emerged from one of the high-backed chairs in front of the fireplace.

"Grandpa," said Dorothy, "this is Jo Porte. You asked me to bring her up to see you."

"I did!" At the resonance in the voice of the old man Jo felt oddly reassured. It was the voice she remembered, although the form had withered terribly. He peered out at her and still she did not waver. "You've grown since I saw you last, young woman. You remember? You used to be all legs and arms and neck in those days. But you've filled out to a fine young filly. You'll be looking for a husband one of these days, eh?"

"Oh, Grandpa!" Dorothy exclaimed. "She's only fourteen and—"

"What of it!" old Ashbrooke thundered. Jo saw with alarm that beneath the white wisp of his hair a vein rose out on his forehead, and his eyes were sharp as she thought sapphires might be. His long, thin hands beat upon the arms of his chair. "What of it! What are women made for, eh? Your great-grandmother married at fourteen in Connecticut and came a pioneer bride to Iowa while it was still part of the territory of Wisconsin. Women weren't soft in those days—and they didn't raise soft young ones. I remember the sod house we lived in till I was twelve—and the feather bed my mother brought with her all the way from the farm in Connecticut in a covered wagon behind an ox team. All nine of us—brothers and sisters—were born in that bed!"

Dorothy blushed with embarrassment while the old man glared defiantly out from beneath white porcupine quills of eyebrows.

"Shall I bring you up some cake and ice cream, Grandpa?" she asked tactfully.

"Sit down beside the hearth, young woman," the old man invited with a nod toward Jo. His lean, knotted finger indicated a bench that stood to one side of the fireplace. Jo looked apprehensively toward it. The birch flames were snapping like dogs' teeth in the chimney.

"We mustn't stay, Grandpa," Dorothy said.

"Remember when I used to tell you about the massacre on Spirit Lake back in 1857?"

He was addressing his words confidentially to Jo, it seemed. She felt flattered and impressed. "I used to ask you to tell me about it," she reminded him.

"You did. And I told you, eh? Life and courage went hand in hand in that time. I told you that, too. We had reason for fighting in those days. No politics in that fight, eh? Do you remember what we fought for?"

Jo, forgetting Dorothy, laughed outright. "You used to say, 'Land, land, and more land!' "

"Right! And why did we fight for it? Because we loved it. We loved it—we fought for it—we won it—and we went to work on it. There was some sense in that fight, eh? But will you tell me now what they were fighting for over there in Europe? Can you tell me that, eh?"

Jo hesitated. "I—"

"How could you know? The men that did the fighting didn't know. It wasn't a war to tame the wilderness. I'll tell you what it was, young woman. Politics—power—greed—suspicion, that's what it was! And what did they get out of it, eh? Waste and desolation, that's what they got out of it. Waste and desolation. We don't know it yet. But we will know it. I won't live to see it, but you'll live to see it. When our women have squandered all the profits of war on fripperies and gimcracks and folderol, we'll wake up and see ruin around us. Yes, and famine, like as not. Mark my words, young woman! And they'll have to take to the land again to build for the future. To the land, do you hear? Your generation—and maybe another on top of it—two generations building from the ground up—two generations making up for the waste of four years!"

"If you shout so Mamma'll think you're going to have another stroke, Grandpa!" Dorothy pleaded and touched his knee placatingly with her white hand.

"Eh?" He squinted at her, but Jo saw that he had not heard her and did not wish to hear. When he spoke again, however, his voice was lower and his manner more calm. It was almost as if he were talking to himself. "We grew rich down there on the Niobrara. That's down in Nebraska. But it was a bald country—too much moonlight when there was a moon. I wanted lakes and forests. And I got 'em, by thunder! Ten sections—right here in the north. That was greed, eh? I'll not argue the point. But I brought in settlers, didn't I? Men and women who knew what to do with land when they had it—earth users, that's what I called 'em." He leaned toward Jo, searching her face from beneath his bristling brows. "And you're one of 'em, young woman. It's in your face. It's in your eyes. You're a—you're an earth user, by God!"

“Grandpa!” Dorothy whimpered, tears widening her eyes.

But old Ashbrooke Hilyard’s eyes were fixed upon Jo. He bent toward her again. “When you come to marry, young woman, don’t marry beneath you. Never marry a Hilyard, do you hear! The breed’s gone wrong. I used to think—”

Suddenly he lapsed into silence and his long chin poked abruptly down into the clean white of his shirt front, in between the plaid, flannel folds of the robe he wore. Jo noted all these things. She was to think of them at a time when she knew she would never see him again.

“Let’s go,” Dorothy whispered. “He’s asleep. That’s the way he’s been ever since he had his stroke. He talks a lot and then he goes to sleep. Mamma says it’s best for him. He’ll be eighty pretty soon.”

She drew Jo through the doorway and into the hall. Together they went to the head of the main stairway that was a cascade of white and black that fell into the glossy pool below. Jo’s feet were reluctant to make the descent —away from the dusky, firelit room in the tower and the booming voice of old Ashbrooke Hilyard. As she followed Dorothy it seemed that she was slipping noiselessly down a hurrying waterfall whose course knew no control.

Chapter Three

1

Mamma doesn't have a rug down here in the hall," said Dorothy apologetically, "because once we had a maid who slipped on it and broke her leg."

As she spoke she smiled so winningly, with such dimpling roguishness, that Jo felt herself warming to her in an irresistible rush. And then, when for no reason whatever Dorothy linked her arm through Jo's and gave it a cozy squeeze, Jo felt a lump of happiness come up in her throat. They paused in front of a doorway through which came sounds of talk and laughter, and under it all the subdued notes of a strummed instrument and the low hum of a voice singing.

"Ashbrooke is playing his ukulele," Dorothy remarked. "He sings just everything—and he's terribly handsome."

She drew Jo with her into a room that was all raspberry-colored and plushy, with a soft, wet-gold light flooding it from the west windows. A burnished piano with yellow keys stood against the far wall. There were plump velvety chairs with doilies on their backs and arms, a table with feet that were crystal balls held in bronze claws, and a rack under it for books and magazines. Against an adjacent wall stood a bookcase with glass doors. There was a deep divan, too, but Ashbrooke sat on the floor in front of the cobblestone fireplace wholly oblivious, it seemed, to everything about him, his voice just audible above the talk and laughter in the room.

A tall meager woman in black taffeta stood within the circle of chairs occupied by Dorothy's young guests. She was holding a pencil and a pad of paper in her hand, and Jo saw that the girls also each held a sheet of paper. By their flushed cheeks and bright eyes Jo could see that they had already overcome the awkwardness they must have felt when they had first arrived here. Phoebe Dibney, the two Vandermeyer girls, Doris and Edna, Evelyn Broatch, and Thelma and Hilda Toufang—they all saw her come in, but

because she was one of themselves it was not necessary to acknowledge her presence by word or act.

"They're playing games with Milledge," Dorothy said in an aside, her voice low and amused. "Let's sit down. I'd rather, wouldn't you?"

Self-consciousness made Jo's legs stiff as she followed Dorothy past young Ashbrooke, now sprawled on his back, to the couch behind him. As she stepped by him he shut one eye impudently and peered straight up with the other.

"She's got pink pants on!" he murmured as if in awe.

Her face flaming, Jo seated herself primly on the edge of the couch. She was glad there was such a din in the room. It helped her somehow to resist the impulse to swing her foot out and kick young Ashbrooke Hilyard in the face as he lay there languidly looking up at her. After a moment he sat up and brushed back his dark wavy hair with a sweep of one hand.

"And what might your name be?" he demanded.

"My name is Jo Porte." She made her neck long, clicked her jaws, and averted her face disdainfully.

Dorothy wound one of her fat cylinders of curls about her finger. "Don't stretch your neck out like that, Jo," she advised coolly. "You don't look pretty when you do."

Jo felt a horrible red spreading over her freckles. Her mouth was dry and her throat ached, but it was impossible to tear her staring eyes away from Dorothy's calm scrutiny. She sensed herself growing stiff with resentment, while the ardent glow she had felt toward Dorothy a moment before vanished. But now, suddenly, from deep down came an excitement she could not deny. Dorothy had implied, at least, that she was pretty—when she didn't stretch her neck.

The approach of Milledge was a gratifying interruption. The game had come to an end with a great shout of laughter—Jo had not believed her school friends capable of such abandonment in the Hilyard house. She wondered if it had anything to do with this mysterious Milledge. Milledge was square-edged as a board, from her shoulders down. Her iron-gray hair might have been painted on her head, so smooth it was. She looked severely down at Jo.

"You're the little Porte girl, aren't you?" Her tone was so astonishingly kind that Jo felt suddenly like crying and could only bob her head in reply.

“Grandpa Hilyard has spoken of you. Dorothy took you to see him?”

“That’s why we were late for the games, Milledge,” Dorothy explained with elegant patience.

“Of course. Go and speak to your young guests, my dear, while I sit a moment.”

“Isn’t it time for the ice cream and cake?” Dorothy asked. She said it with no eagerness, but rather as if she were suffering these refreshments for the sake of those who rarely had them, and Jo knew definitely now that she hated her as she hated this Ashbrooke, lounging on the floor.

“In a moment. We’re waiting for your mother and father,” Milledge said with forbearance. “Besides, Royce and Teresa haven’t come in from riding yet. You might draw out the drop-leaf table and have it ready for Hedvig. The girls will help you, I’m sure.”

With a sigh Dorothy left the couch to discharge her duties as hostess. Milledge glanced down reprovingly at Ashbrooke, who was lying on his back now and with one pant leg pulled up was idly admiring his shapely calf.

“Your position is anything but dignified, Ashbrooke,” she suggested coolly.

He got to his feet with a yawn. “I suppose Royce and Tess are taking their afternoon nap under the trees,” he observed nonchalantly. “They’ve been gone an hour now despite the drizzle, as it were.”

Milledge looked at him for a moment. When she spoke her voice was stern but almost inaudible. “Ashbrooke, please!”

He sauntered out of the room, and Milledge relaxed with a relieved breath as she seated herself beside Jo.

“I’m afraid Ashbrooke is not on his best behavior,” she said, smiling. “He and Royce are inseparable when they’re at home. You see, there are only two years between them. But Royce went riding with Teresa Jaffey as soon as it looked as though it would clear up. Perhaps you know her? Her father is the banker in Carthia.”

“I don’t know her,” said Jo.

Milledge tried another approach. “You know all these girls, of course.”

“I’ve gone to school with some of them,” Jo told her. “Doris and Thelma are older than me.”

"I see. Grandpa Hilyard used to be a regular visitor at your school. He took such an interest in the kind of teacher they had and how the children were progressing. But when the war came, he seemed to lose interest in such things—and since the war, of course, he hasn't been able to go about." She sighed once more. "The years bring many changes. But there—we mustn't be melancholy. Do you sing, my dear?"

Jo swallowed hard. "I sing when I'm alone sometimes. And I can make bird calls in the woods pretty well."

"Really! I'd love to hear you sometime. When it grows a little warmer you must come over and take me walking in the woods. I know the most wonderful place—just a little way north of here—along the lake, where—"

"That's the Owl Country," Jo informed her with a return of courage.

"Why, of course! I've always wanted to leave the road there and go exploring. It's quite a jungle, isn't it?"

"People get lost there sometimes," Jo said tersely.

Milledge clapped her hands and Jo stared. "*Won*-derful! Why, I remember now. Royce was lost there once. Some day, very soon, you and I shall go in together and get lost—oh, for hours! All my life I've wanted to get lost!"

Jo looked at her with a surprise that was very close to alarm, but just then the door opened to admit Mr. and Mrs. Hilyard. She glanced up and quickly through her mind passed all that she had heard her father and mother say of them, so that as they came forward a bright color of strangeness and difference seemed to wreathe them about.

Alda Hilyard had been the daughter of a doctor in Carthia, who had come originally from the East. She was short, round, built like a top, with a waistline that started from halfway down to her knees in front and fetched up at last behind her hips. The children, Dorothy and Ashbrooke especially, had inherited her beautiful, opulent, dusky-rose skin and her shining, dark curly hair, but not her unfortunate stature. Mr. Hilyard stood well over six feet, lean and dry and whitening as a poplar, and in his rugged face his eyes had a blue, lost abstraction. No one in the county had ever been able to learn what it was that ailed Leonard Hilyard, the gentleman farmer, that he should have a look of polite melancholy. Perhaps it was his wife, as Jo's father had suggested, Alda having a nonsensical bent toward society when there wasn't much of the sort around Carthia, and besides that running the poor man ragged with her ideas of how their children should be brought up. Perhaps,

people said, it was because of her that Len Hilyard was so withdrawn from the life about him, devoted altogether to the practical problems of his stock farm. At any rate, there he was, between his wife and his father, old Ashbrooke, who despised everything Alda Hilyard revered.

Milledge was speaking her name now, and Jo got numbly to her feet and said, "Pleased-to-meet-you!" Mr. Hilyard smiled absently and proceeded to light a cigar. But Mrs. Hilyard's glance went all over her, so quick and oblique that afterwards Jo could not have been sure that she had looked at her at all except that she felt as she always did when she saw heat lightning. It was a sense of being suffused and made small in darkness.

While Hedvig brought in ice cream and cake and a couple of the larger girls helped Dorothy set out delicate, flowered china dishes and silver spoons on embroidered doilies, Mrs. Hilyard sat down in a deep chair at the end of the couch and propped her feet up on a hassock. Then she asked Jo immediately about her school and her teacher, and whether the children in the school were clean and well behaved. It was hard to tell the truth, but Jo steeled herself and responded with painful conscientiousness. Yes, they were clean and well behaved, but twice her mother had found a louse in Jo's hair and had had to soak her head with kerosene.

"Heavens!" Mrs. Hilyard murmured, and turned away. "Milledge, who is that tall child over there—isn't that one of Mrs. Vandermeyer's girls? Have her come and talk to me."

But Mr. Hilyard looked at Jo through the haze of his cigar smoke and laughed so suddenly that Jo was startled. He sat down at once in the place Milledge had vacated.

"Grandfather Hilyard would have given ten dollars to hear that remark," he said as if he were talking to himself, and Jo saw how tired his face was now that the laughter had left it. He turned to her quickly. "Did your father come over with you?"

Jo shook her head. "He had to stay home. We're expecting Aggie to—"

"You didn't walk over?"

"It isn't far—only I've got to be back in time to make supper."

He reached over and took her hand gently. "Don't be in a hurry. I'll have one of the men take you home. And now, let's get in on some of this ice cream, eh?"

As he spoke there came the sound of ringing laughter from the hall, and immediately young Ashbrooke Hilyard came into the room, his arm about the shoulders of a daintily made girl in breeches and riding boots, her shock of auburn hair bound by a scarf of green silk. As she stepped into the room she plucked the scarf from her head and shook her hair free, then came toward the couch, her hands extended in greeting to Leonard Hilyard.

"Oh, we had the wildest ride, Daddy Hilyard!" she exclaimed, and stooped to kiss the upturned cheek of Mrs. Hilyard. "The rain was just right!"

Mr. Hilyard had risen. "Good! I'm glad you enjoyed it." He turned with a gesture of his hand. "This is Jo Porte—one of Dorothy's guests, Tessie." He bowed slightly toward Jo. "Teresa Jaffey."

Teresa looked down and said, "How do you do?" Jo's tongue clove to the roof of her mouth. She gave an incoherent reply. "Oh, I'm so warm!" Teresa said, and switched out of her riding jacket. "*And* damp!"

"Where's Royce?" Mr. Hilyard asked, seating himself again beside Jo.

"He'll be in right away. Ashbrooke wouldn't let me wait. He's jealous!"

She turned and laughed throatily at Ashbrooke, who had come up behind her. He reached out and grasped her short mane of tawny hair in his long fingers and jerked her head roughly back and forth.

"Jealous of what? He's my brother, isn't he?"

Mr. Hilyard smiled up at them. "You'll have a hard time breaking up that combination, Tess—unless you find a girl for Ash."

Teresa stopped laughing. She threw herself on the couch beside Mr. Hilyard and crossed her long, slim legs. The length of her body seemed to melt and stretch. Jo stared. Teresa's bosom rose into two little abrupt cones.

Mr. Hilyard got up. "We're being neglected. I'll have Hedvig bring some ice cream."

"Not any for me, thanks," Teresa called languidly after him as he made his way toward the table on the far side of the room.

Ashbrooke thrust his hands deep into the pockets of his trousers and looked down with a twisted smile at Teresa's upturned face. She scowled at him, then made her lips into a provocative little rosebud.

"Royce certainly knows how to pick 'em!" he whispered in a voice that was just audible, and turned away.

“And how is your dear mother, Tessie?” Mrs. Hilyard asked, leaning from her chair at the end of the couch.

All at once, though she could not have told why, Jo did not want the ice cream and cake, even off pretty, thin dishes. There were chocolate eggs, too, and other Easter favors heaped in a cut-glass bowl, but even they did not seem tempting. She wanted to be home in the warm low kitchen playing rummy with Goldy Matthews on the scrubbed pine table while old Bounce stretched and groaned in comfort beside the stove.

It was then that Royce Hilyard came into the room. He paused for a moment near the door and let his eyes rove slowly and negligently from one side to the other. Though she had had glimpses of him before, Jo had never had a good look at the eldest of the Hilyard children. He was about his father’s height, taller than Ashbrooke. Under the dark spur of his hair his face was lean and high-flushed, his eyes widely irised in blue, carelessly direct. There was something of the same sulky sweetness about his face as there was about his younger brother’s and sister’s, but his mouth was firmer, though smoothly full and arrogant as theirs. All three of them had that lush, dewy look, as if they had been too well nourished. They looked like good, rich food, Jo decided. But about Royce there was something more, something thoughtful and almost frightening that was absent in Ashbrooke and Dorothy.

When his eyes came finally to the couch where she sat, Jo’s mind flashed to the old man who sat alone in the tower room upstairs. Royce’s eyes were the eyes of old Ashbrooke Hilyard. And for the brief moment while he stood and looked at her it was as if only two people were there in the living room, herself and Royce Hilyard.

Teresa Jaffey’s honeyed treble broke rudely across Jo’s thoughts. “Oh, Roycie, come here!”

But then Ashbrooke came hurtling from the other side of the room and tackled his brother about the knees. The two went down in an immense, sprawling heap, while the oak floor seemed to rock beneath their weight. Ashbrooke let out a whoop of triumph and sat on Royce’s head. Royce gasped and groaned with helpless laughter, then caught Ashbrooke about the waist and threw him head over heels. When they were both standing on their feet again, panting and grinning, their hair a mass of tousled curls, they threw their arms about each other’s shoulders and leaned against each other for mock support.

Throughout the scene Mrs. Hilyard had looked on with an indulgent smile, as if this performance was very familiar to her; Mr. Hilyard had ventured a not very serious protest, and Teresa and Dorothy had cheered. Jo had glanced about at the girls she knew, and had seen from their faces that they felt as she did—that they were for the moment completely forgotten by the Hilyards, that they were outside of that charmed circle.

She saw the shining affection between the two brothers as they gave each other a parting punch in the ribs, and a strange embarrassment came over her.

Royce walked over then and stood in front of Jo, looking down at her for all the world as if there were no Teresa Jaffeys anywhere.

"You're Jo Porte, aren't you?" he asked.

"Yes."

From a fearful height above her his eyes twinkled down, blue and amused, but kind. "I remember you," he said. "You've grown—tremendously!"

Teresa raised a slender arm toward him. "Royce, darling, sit down here—beside me."

"I'd better run up and say hello to Grandfather first. He wasn't feeling so well when we went out."

"That's very thoughtful of you, Royce," Mrs. Hilyard sighed approvingly, and crossed her plump, slippered feet the other way.

But Dorothy was back from the refreshment table with another dish of ice cream. "Royce!" she cried. "Don't you think Jo Porte is cute? She's got the prettiest mouth I ever saw. It curls up at the corners all by itself, even when she isn't smiling!"

She spoke so sincerely that Jo felt confused all over again, pulled this way and that in like and dislike of her.

Royce gave Jo an intent scrutiny. "She'll be a very handsome woman some day," he said critically, with the penetration of advanced years.

Teresa Jaffey's face went blank, as if there were a stiff polish over it. "We ought to have more logs on the fire, Royce, dear," she observed.

He reached down and pinched her milky, unfreckled cheek. "I'll be back down in a jiff," he promised, and stalked off.

Dorothy, sitting close to Jo now, was sweet and warm with small talk that was only for themselves, and Jo wondered how she could ever have believed that she hated her. But nevertheless it seemed hours before Hedvig came to take away the dishes. Mrs. Hilyard and Teresa had been chattering brightly about the work of the Drama League in Carthia. . . . "The paper on Ibsen for the final meeting . . . This new playwright, Eugene O'Neill . . ." Dorothy, leaning toward Jo, had been betraying in soft, confidential undertones intimate and inconsequential secrets of the Hilyard household. "I don't like her much, but she'll marry Royce, I'll bet anything. . . . Spend the summer at Cape Cod, but Daddy says we can't afford it this year. . . . May not be able to go back to school in September. . . ." Mr. Hilyard, approaching slowly from the other side of the room, young Ashbrooke talking to him earnestly. . . . "Why not sell the timber?" And Mr. Hilyard's low, pained voice in reply: "And break your grandfather's heart—and mine, too, for that matter. . . ."

It was all a strange, uncomfortable dream in which voices and faces mingled without order or pattern. But it was to take form with shocking suddenness. There came the hurried sound of footsteps on the hall stairs, and Royce burst into the room and stood before his father, his face white, his whole tall body showing the effort he was making to control his emotion.

"What's the matter, son?" Mr. Hilyard asked.

Royce stared steadily into his father's eyes. "Dad—he's gone!" Jo could not see just then anybody else in the room because of the way Royce looked. "He was talking to me—about the land and—he just fell back—in his old chair!"

Now Jo saw that Mr. Hilyard was looking straight ahead of him, his eyes very blue and far away. She glanced about her quickly, clasping her trembling hands tightly together. Mrs. Hilyard gave a low moan, Dorothy had already begun to cry, Teresa was looking frightened, and young Ashbrooke was standing with his hand on his brother's shoulder.

At last Leonard Hilyard spoke, and Jo saw that he looked now vividly like his father. "We'd better go up, Royce."

But Royce remained for a moment where he was and looked down at Jo. "He was talking about you—just before he—before the end," he said simply. "I thought maybe you'd like to know that."

Jo could not speak. She pressed her nails into her palms, and through quickly misting eyes watched Royce Hilyard as he turned and walked away

with his father.

2

Easter Monday dawned in a sky that was a washed and hollow shell. Jo had gone out as soon as the breakfast dishes were done and walked alone along the lake's edge. Then she cut through the woods to the corner of the field to the place she remembered. At first she thought that perhaps she had been mistaken in the clump of dried mullein she had marked yesterday near the rabbit's nest. But soon she became sure with a stricken, awful conviction, for in the damp soil around the empty, forlorn hollow were strong crows' tracks and tiny tufts of fur that you might have mistaken for thistledown had you not known. Jo gave a muffled scream and, with eyes tight shut against tears of horror, ran blind and frantic down the length of the wood-path. The narrow road wound deep in thickset, somberly tall firs where she stumbled out upon it at last. It did not matter which way she went upon that road, but back to where she had come from she would never go—for that place would be dappled forever now with the new shadows of dread. In a stand of last year's dried weeds she sank to her knees and sobbed convulsively. This was what life was—this opening of a gold, blind door upon a black corridor of terror!

Chapter Four

1

Jo sat between her father and mother in the cramped pew and listened to the drone of the preacher's voice as he spoke words of consolation and high hope, and of the life everlasting that awaited all beyond the grave. . . . "In my Father's house are many mansions. . . ." The little spray of hepatica blossoms which she had gathered along the wood road only an hour ago was wilting already, the delicate, pale purple heads drooping over her fingers. She had brought them as a shy tribute to the man whose still form lay now in the broad space before the altar, but her first sight of the huge gray casket banked about with rich flowers had appalled her. She had kept her offering clutched tightly in her hand and had slipped into the pew ahead of her father.

This was the church that old Ashbrooke Hilyard had caused to be built nearly twenty years ago after he had begun to settle his land about Fallen Star Lake with families from other parts of the state, from Wisconsin and Iowa and Nebraska. And these were the people who had known him in those years, men and women from Carthia, dressed in somber black for the most part and crowded into the narrow pine pews on either side of the aisle; men and women from the farms about the lake, looking stiff and uncomfortable in their best clothes, many of them standing about the walls and filling the open space at the back beside the door.

When they stood to sing it was like the sudden rush of wind among the pines, Jo thought.

When I can read my title clear
To mansions in the skies,
I'll bid farewell to every fear
And wipe my weeping eyes.

She wondered if these people knew of the mansions as she did, mansions white and tall, with four great pillars in front and a brass horseshoe on the

door with an H—that might be for Heaven, now—curiously wrought to fill the inner circle of the shoe. Did they think of a mansion as having a great tower with windows that looked out upon a blue lake where there was sunrise and sunset and a glittering noon between? And did they know that mansions had great, sweeping stairways, soft-carpeted, that fell away to a shining pool below?

The singing ceased, and the prayer, and now the congregation was leaving the pews and marching solemnly down to gaze for the last time upon the face of the man they had known for so many years. Jo stole apart from her father and mother and pushed her way up the aisle until she reached the door. Why should she look again upon a face that was more clearly limned in her memory than her own father's? For such is the deft power of pain.

When they had left the church at last and were gathered about the heap of moist clay in the yard, Jo heard the preacher's voice again in dreary monotone and crept forward unobserved to a place well within the crowded circle. "I am the resurrection and the life and whosoever believeth in me shall not perish but have everlasting . . ."

Jo looked up and saw Mr. Leonard Hilyard, pale, taut, a shadow of defeat in his eyes, as if something that had once been born within him had never come quite to fullness and was dead now and in the grave with his father. Beside him Alda Hilyard stood, her stout figure carefully garbed, her outer calm hiding whatever feelings she may have known. Dorothy was weeping softly as she clung to her mother's arm, her eyes strangely deep and dark in her frightened face. Young Ashbrooke's gaze shifted, impatient of pause, restless before the display of emotion about him, loath to dwell upon the dull spectacle of an old man being laid to rest. Royce had remained a little apart from the others, his eyes fixed hard upon the ground, his lips tight-locked and his jaws set against the upward rush of feeling which threatened every moment to break control. Jo, watching him intently, wished the preacher would soon come to the end of his talking. If he didn't do so soon something was going to happen to Royce. What was the need of so much talk anyhow—and reading from the little black book—and endless praying? It would have been enough to—

Suddenly old Ashbrooke's own words came to her—"Life and courage went hand in hand . . ." She repeated the words to herself—and just then the preacher's voice ceased.

The abrupt silence was almost unbearable. Royce stepped suddenly forward, lifted a moist clod of earth and dropped it into the open pit, then turned away. Jo watched the others gazing at him with something like awe in

their eyes before they began shuffling slowly toward the churchyard gate. She waited for a moment, glancing about her until she was sure that no one was looking, then tossed the crushed spray of hepaticas into the grave.

"Come along, Jobina!" her mother ordered in a brusque undertone.

2

The smell of coffee came sturdy and snug from the kitchen. Jo's mother had issued no invitations and her neighbors had given her no warning, but the old habit had prompted her to prepare for their "dropping in" on their way home from the funeral. The Toufangs, the Dibneys, Peter Torkelson, who had taken over the Morris place a year ago, and even Tom Matthews and his wife were there, though they had driven a mile past their own place and would have to go back again. Young Luther Billings, who had lately bought a farm south of the Hilyards', had come no farther than the barn, where he and Ned Larkin had fallen into talk of their own.

Jo only half listened to the voices in the Porte living room as she went from one to another with cups and saucers.

"He was just about the last of the old-timers," Tom Matthews said solemnly. "We won't meet his kind again."

Brade Toufang cleared his throat roughly. "He'll make way for someone else."

"Ve all do," Peter Torkelson put in quietly. "Sometimes it vorks out good—and den sometimes it vorks out not so good. Ve never know. T'ings change vit'out us. Ve yust go on."

"That's because people like us can't do much about it, Peter," George Dibney observed. "It's people like the Hilyards that make the changes for us."

"There won't be much change," Ernest Porte said quickly. "While the old man was alive we had our farms and we worked 'em year in and year out. And we'll do the same now after he's dead."

"Yes, and what has it ever got us?" Jo's mother asked as she paused before Mrs. Dibney, coffeepot in hand. "Are we any farther ahead today than we were when we came here?"

Well, Jo thought, *we* own our land, anyhow. And wasn't that being farther ahead?

"How much farther ahead has anybody got in the last ten years—or the last twenty for that matter?" Ernest was lighting his pipe. In that attitude, Jo thought, he always looked like somebody of importance. She felt, just then, very proud of him.

Jo's mother sniffed contemptuously. "That's you all over!"

"They're all alike, the men!" Mrs. Dibney spoke up. "If they can eat and sleep and have a rag of a shirt to their backs, they're satisfied!"

"In thirteen years," Mabel Porte went on, "I've been off this place just once—and that was when I went home to bury my own father."

Jo saw that her mother was close to tears now.

"Well, I sort o' like it here," her father said mildly.

Brade Toufang shifted his chair noisily. "It wouldn't be so bad if we all had a title to the land we're workin'. It was all right to pay rent to the old man—it was his scheme in the first place and we came into it under him. But I'll be damned if I'm goin' to pay rent all the rest of my life to them Hilyard brats that never done an honest hand's turn since they was born."

"There'll be a change there, you'll see!" George Dibney declared. "The Hilyards ain't settin' as high today as they once did. Charlie Vandermeyer says he was talkin' to Len Hilyard last week. Len looks to a sharp drop in beef this fall. He ain't goin' to feed more'n about a hundred head or so this summer."

An anxious crease appeared between Ernest Porte's brows. "Yes, Charlie was tellin' me about that. I don't know—but when a man like Mr. Hilyard thinks we're in for a mean spell, it don't look too good for the rest of us. We can't expect the war prices to last forever."

"One thing about the old man," Tom Matthews said, "you could always count on him carryin' you over a bad year or two if—"

"And if we get stuck again, Len Hilyard'll do just as much for us—any time," Ernest Porte assured him.

"If he can, that is," Brade Toufang suggested. "By the time he looks after that family of his, he won't have much left for anything else. And if anything happens to him—"

“I declare he looked ready to drop any minute there today,” Jo’s mother interrupted.

Ernest laughed. “He’s good for a long pull yet. Why, he’s a young man—not much over fifty—and he comes from a hardy stock. No sense in us gettin’ all worked up about nothin’.”

“But did you see Royce throw that lump of dirt into the grave?” Mrs. Dibney asked with proper dramatic effect. “My land, wasn’t it the queerest thing? It gave me the creeps! And the way he did it! For a moment I was afraid he’d jump in himself.”

“I seen that happen once,” Tom Matthews said. “Down home in Iowa it was. Only the boy wasn’t as old as Royce—about fourteen or fifteen, mebbe—and it was his mother’s funeral instead of his grandfather’s. He jist jumped in before anybody could stop him. My own father was one of the men that went down and got him out. He was always kind o’ queer, the boy was. The whole family was a little off. Totten, their name was—Totten, down in Iowa.”

“George saw a man get right up out of his coffin once, didn’t you, George?” Mrs. Dibney prompted her husband.

George Dibney smiled reminiscently. “That was old man Wilkie. He’d been dyin’ for years. When he finally kicked the bucket they laid him out a sight neater’n he’d ever been when he was alive. Course it was probably the first time he’d been sober in twenty years. Anyhow, when the preacher was readin’ a prayer over him in church, old Wilkie sat right up in front o’ the whole congregation and hollered, ‘What the hell’s goin’ on here?’ And he lived for eight years after that!”

They always laughed at George Dibney’s stories, and Brade Toufang always slapped his thighs when he laughed. They would talk and laugh for another hour, the men would begin to tease their wives, and finally the women would go to the kitchen to gossip among themselves, leaving their husbands to talk of the weather and the fields and the sowing. Jo had heard it all before, and although she often found pleasure in listening, especially to the gossip of the women, it bored her today. She was glad when her mother, glancing from the window, told her to run out and bring Ned Larkin and Lute Billings into the house for their coffee.

“I don’t know what’s keeping them out there to themselves.”

“It ain’t like Ned to sit outside when there’s eatin’ goin’ on in the house,” Jo’s father said.

“If a man works he’s got to eat,” Mabel Porte remarked, and turned from the window.

Jo found Ned and the younger man seated on a bench just inside the stable doorway. The smell was warm and comfortable there in the shelter from the chill wind off the lake.

“If you want your coffee, Ma says you’d better come in now and get it,” Jo announced abruptly.

But Ned Larkin was talking and made no response beyond knocking the cold ashes from his pipe and getting to his feet.

“. . . and that’s why I figger on gettin’ out this fall for good. Farmin’ used to give a man a livin’, but them times is past. Anyhow, what kind of a livin’ do you get out of it even when times is good? A man only lives once, Lute, and he owes it to himself to get out in the world a little. Anyhow, that’s my idea of it.”

Young Lute Billings got up and brushed the back of one hand thoughtfully with the palm of the other. Jo noticed how tall he was alongside Ned Larkin, and how straight and sturdy his legs were. He must be about the same age as Royce Hilyard, she thought. For a moment she was fascinated by the growth of fine, dust-colored hair on the backs of his strong hands. There was something almost pathetic about it, as there was about the slow way he had of brushing one hand with the other when there was no call for it.

“Still,” he said quietly, “I figger on stayin’ for a while now that I’m here. I guess I like it, that’s all. Don’t know any other reason.”

And as he spoke his pale hazel eyes were looking into Jo’s face with a kind of inner light that she had never seen in them before.

3

Others might speculate about the future now that Ashbrooke Hilyard was dead, but Jo herself had no need to ask what change the old man’s passing had brought to her. She was aware in her own way that something rich and generous and full had gone from the world and would never return. Not only that. The Stately Mansion would never be the same—even from the top of the Norway pine. She resolved never to climb the tree again for as much as a

glimpse of the great white house on the other side of the lake. In some strange way the place would have changed now. It would *look* different—not like the Stately Mansion at all.

So, at least, she thought as she sat at the breakfast table the next morning, her eyes upon the kitchen window which framed a view of the lake and Spite Island lying sullen under a gray sky. For minutes she had been staring unseeingly, her fingernail making squares in the yellow oilcloth that covered the table. The men had gone to the fields and Jo's mother was busy setting the living room in order again after yesterday's visit from the neighbors. She had been too tired to do anything about it last night.

"What in the world are you dreaming about, Jobina?" Jo looked up, startled, and saw her mother standing in the doorway to the living room. "If you don't feel right you'd better go back to bed. You didn't catch cold yesterday, did you?"

Jo got up from the table. "No—I feel all right."

Her mother came into the kitchen and began to pile the breakfast dishes noisily. "If you're feeling all right I wish you'd put the rest of the doughnuts into a basket and take them across to old man Baggott. Leave a few out for Ned's lunch—he likes them—but take the rest. I made far too many and they'll only dry up. I'm sure old Baggott'll find use for them. I don't know how the man lives. Run along now and I'll clear the table. The walk'll do you good if you're not ailing."

It was some months now since Jo had last gone to see old Phineas Baggott. If she had had her own way about it she would never have gone, even for the fun she always got from telling Goldy Matthews about it afterwards and watching her shiver from fright. Jo had never gone past the old man's door. Her approach to the stone house in the hollow had always been heralded by the vicious barking of his pack of dogs, and Phineas would be waiting outside, seated on a bench in a clump of white birches that stood a few feet from his doorstep. But Jo's fancy had gone beyond the birches and the doorstep and had filled the house with frightening things that made Goldy squirm to hear about them.

Less than a mile along the road from the Porte place two rough posts and a bar between them marked the entrance to Phineas Baggott's. He had lived there a long time, even before old Ashbrooke Hilyard came north from Nebraska. He had owned land in those days, two whole sections of it that bordered the lake and reached westward into a stand of pine and oak as sturdy as any in the district. No one seemed to know exactly what happened

between Phineas and Ashbrooke, but there had been loans and mortgages and finally disputes about deeds—and Phineas Baggott was left with forty acres, away from the lake, and the stone house in the hollow. Ashbrooke Hilyard had the rest. It was understood that the forty acres and the stone house were his as well, but he had been pleased to let Phineas remain. That was all Jo had ever known about the business involving the two men. Years ago she had heard her father mention Baggott's name in the presence of old Mr. Hilyard. It was at harvest time, and Phineas Baggott had reaped nothing because he had sowed nothing. Ashbrooke Hilyard had said something about an unfaithful steward and had gone on at once to talk of something else. One thing, however, was known to everyone. The two men had not exchanged words in more than fifteen years. Of late, in fact, Phineas Baggott had exchanged few words with anyone. He was rarely seen anywhere off the forty acres where his house stood, and the few who made it their business to call on him now and then went always in the expectation of finding the old man dead when they got there.

Jo set her basket on the ground and slipped under the bar. The way before her now lay under a clifflike bank that reared itself abruptly above her and darkened the narrow roadway that led to the stone house. Even in midsummer the ground was always damp here. Now Jo had to pick her way carefully about the pools of water that had come down from the higher ground with the melting of the snow. When the road finally left the bank and dipped down into Baggott's Hollow, she halted a moment as the old man's dogs set up their unearthly clamor. But there was Phineas sitting on his bench among the birches. He rose and came toward Jo.

"Down, Freda! Down, Stormy!" he said in a gentle tone to the dogs, and the brutes sank to their bellies, fawning and thumping their tails. "They just like to put on a show. Wouldn't hurt a fly unless I told them to. Folks around are scared of them when they're running, but they wouldn't stop to look at a person. Not them!" He regarded them with a fond black eye from beneath a ragged fringe of white eyebrow.

Jo had always wanted to know what it was they ran after, and this was a good time to ask. In response the old man gave her a mysterious and somehow chilling wink.

"There isn't a soul on earth knows that," said he, and Jo felt a thrill of delicious fear, of awesome respect for some eerie dreadfulness.

She looked at the small, dainty white beard that so surprisingly finished Baggott's seamed brown face. It was said that although he never bathed he

devoted hours of attention to his goatee, and Jo could well believe it. She held her basket toward him. “Ma sent you some doughnuts. She made too many and they didn’t eat them all.”

He took the basket and moved aside the clean napkin. Then he stroked his beard. “That was nice of your ma. I always know when she has folks to see her—she sends me something afterwards. She’s a good woman.”

“People came in yesterday after the funeral,” Jo explained.

The old man’s heavy brows drew together. “You’ve had a burying, eh?”

“Old Mr. Hilyard died on Sunday.”

Phineas Baggott shook his head and turned toward the house. “I’ll go empty your basket,” he said, and walked away.

Jo stood and watched him until he had disappeared beyond the doorway. Did it mean so little to him, then, that Ashbrooke Hilyard was dead? She wondered, looking up at the slender twigs of birches swelling with bud. Suddenly it came to her that there used to be four powder-white boles grouped about Phineas Baggott’s bench. Now there were only three. Behind one end of the bench the ground had been freshly broken and tramped back into place.

She went and stood before the doorway. “One of your birches is gone—the big one,” she called into the house, though she could not see the old man.

“Eh?” Then he laughed. “You’ve a keen eye in your head. Yes—it’s gone. It broke off in the wind last week and I had to take it out. They’ll all go—every last one of ’em.”

Jo grew bold. It would be something to be able to tell Goldy Matthews truthfully that she had been inside Phineas Baggott’s house and had seen what was there.

“I’m coming in for a drink of water,” she announced simply, and stepped through the doorway.

One of the dogs barked savagely and she halted.

“Quiet, Juno!” the old man ordered, and the dog was still. “Come back here and get your drink,” he called to Jo, and she made her way toward the back part of the house. The place was gloomy and chill, but she found a narrow doorway beyond which there was a small kitchen lighted by a single

window above a table strewn with dishes and pans. The stale smell was suffocating.

She looked rather doubtfully at the cup he gave her, then dipped it into the pail of water that stood on the table. The water was sweet and cool, and as she drank she looked up at old Baggott. He was leaning over the table, his face toward the window, his eyes half closed and all but hidden beneath the heavy brows.

"It was a long time on the way," he muttered as if to himself, "but it came after all. He's dead before me—and his son will go before me—and his son's son. I'll see them all in their graves before I go. And what help will their land be to them then? It takes little enough land to cover the best of us. How did he die?"

"He was sitting in his chair and just—just died," Jo told him.

"Too good for him—too good for any pirate like Ash Hilyard!" Phineas exploded.

"But Mr. Hilyard wasn't a pirate," Jo objected at once.

The old man turned upon her. "You're very forward, my young woman. The Hilyards are all pirates! Why did Ash Hilyard take my land from me, eh? Didn't he have enough without that?" He brought his grizzled face close to Jo's. "You've a lot to learn yet about the ways of men in the world. It takes a long time to learn it, too. But here's something you can think about. We'll call it the first lesson. You won't learn it at school—and you won't read it in the books they give you, either. Listen—man is a child of Nature. When he turns against his mother—he's done! He may not find out about it right away, but he will. Just remember that and give it a thought now and then. You won't know what I'm telling you—not yet, you won't. But you can remember it, eh?"

She set the cup aside. "I'll remember it."

He stroked his beard thoughtfully. "And here's the second lesson: a man can break God's laws and be forgiven. That's what they teach us. But when he breaks Nature's laws, there's no forgiveness—and there's no escape. Sooner or later he pays the penalty, or his children pay it—or his children's children. It doesn't matter much. It must be paid. That isn't hard to remember, eh?"

"No."

“The third lesson is hardest of all to learn. It’s hard to know sometimes when we sin against Nature. Greed is a sin against Nature. And ambition to sit in a place above your fellow creatures is a sin against Nature. And wasting your substance is a sin against Nature. You may not know the meaning of what I tell you, but you’ll know it some day. The best you can do now is remember what you’ve heard—or some part of it. There’ll be more yet, but not now. If you’ll come along I’ll go as far as the road with you.”

There seemed little hope, indeed, of understanding what Phineas Baggott had told her, or what he told her as they walked side by side to where the way led under the cliff. But from there to the road his talk was of things that anyone might understand. Here he pointed to a broken swelling in the dark soil and scuffed away a little of the surface to reveal a pale bud thrusting upward toward the light. There he marked a spot where last year’s trilliums bloomed. He turned aside to show her where a bittern’s nest was building in the reeds beside a slough. And when they were within sight of the road at last, he stood in silence and counted every sound that came from the woods about them—and had a name for each.

When they reached the gate he lifted the bar and stood aside while Jo passed through.

“You’ll be back again when the season’s greener,” he said, almost as if it was to remain a secret between them, and Jo promised with a nod of her head and hurried away.

At home, when her mother heard all that Phineas Baggott had said, she turned from the stove where she had been busy preparing the midday meal and looked disapprovingly at Jo.

“Of all the rubbish! For an old man to talk like that to a child—he must be cracked!”

“But what was wrong with what he said?” Jo demanded defensively.

“You’ll have plenty to do if you learn what they give you at school,” her mother retorted. “And that reminds me that Easter vacation is almost gone, and we haven’t had your brown shoes half-soled. Remember to send them in with Ned this afternoon.”

When she named him her voice lost its sharpness. The memory came disquietingly to Jo of the afternoon this spring when the snow went so suddenly—and when her mother stood at the door looking out toward the

road as if in expectation. And there came Ned Larkin, walking, his bowed legs dark against the sunlight.

Chapter Five

1

For a long time, all through the faltering, gray, sweet spring, Jo had avoided with chill dread the shallow ledge at the east side of the oat field where the crows had destroyed the rabbit's nest and eaten the young. But she had known, with fascinated, shuddering certainty, that she would one day return to the spot—as she had returned two years ago to the dark ravine in the woods where she had found the bleaching skeletons of two deer that had died with their antlers locked.

Perhaps it was her visits with Phineas Baggott that impelled her to go. She had seen the old man twice since that day in spring when she had gone with the basket of doughnuts. He had talked to her, too—almost as if she were a grown-up. On her last visit he had even told her something of himself, something he had probably told no other, man, woman, or child, since he had come north years before. He had been educated for the Church and had suffered a physical breakdown on the eve of his being ordained. He had sought out Fallen Star Lake then and had struggled back to health in this hermit's retreat he had made for himself in the forest. But the fervor of his first devotion to spiritual things had never gone from him. He had merely found a new expression for it in an ever-changing, ever-changeless Nature from whom he had taken new life, new hope. Jo had listened, her eyes fixed upon the grizzled face of the old man. Whenever she thought of it later it was with the conviction that she had been looking that day upon a countenance in which burned an unquenchable light.

And now she was being drawn back to that stricken little hollow where the dried mullein stalks had stood on Easter Sunday morning. She was going because at breakfast half an hour ago something had told her, out of vacancy, that this was the day. Her father had been complaining about Baggott's pack running again—there was a moon coming full—and about the likelihood of a lamb or two being dead in the pasture. Jo had been sure, with sudden certainty, that the old man's dogs never attacked sheep. That

slander had been spread by squatters up north who probably raided the lambing shelters themselves. But she had said nothing because the thought of Phineas Baggott had loomed exciting and warm in her head, and then immediately she knew that she must go again to that place where Nature had shown her ruthless way.

There had been a pinkish rock, starred with mica, she remembered, only a few feet from where the nest had been. She found it easily and then, her hand against her throat, she looked a short way beyond and saw what had been done there. Over the sad little pocket a stunted wild rose was gorgeously in bloom, and all around its edge lay the broad, downy silver leaves of mullein with pin pricks of dew like dainty frost upon them. Soon the mullein stalks would be taller than Jo, the tiny flowers on the long spikes opening, each in turn, to shine for but a day like little suns over this scar in the dark earth.

She knelt down and fiercely choked back a weak feeling of tears. This was nothing to weep over! This was as things should be, time gone over.

The stones lying about were plain, unworthy, but she gathered them with reverence and made a little pyramid in the center of the hollow. Then, still on her knees, she lifted her eyes and saw the tops of the oak trees foaming in the blaze of the full sun. Her hands went slowly upward, her palms open to the sky, and a sense of being pierced all through with wild exultation pervaded her.

"Jo!"

The soft voice behind her was full of a wondering tenderness. Jo, startled back to reality, sat abruptly on the ground and looked over her shoulder. Her gaze widened. It was Miss Milledge from the Hilyards'.

She laughed softly and came a few steps closer. "Your mother told me you had come this way," she said, smiling queerly. "I thought I'd just come and look for you. You don't mind, do you?"

The gaunt woman seemed very shy and embarrassed, but she offered her hand, and Jo stood up straight and took it, not remembering that her own was grimy from the clay and mold of the stones she had unearthed.

"No, I don't mind. I—I'm glad you came," Jo told her with a quaint formality that brought a flicker of wistfulness to the older woman's face.

"I really came to tell you that Dorothy has come back from school and would like to have you over tomorrow or next day, if you'll come. I mentioned it to your mother and you have her permission."

“I can go tomorrow,” Jo answered politely. She could not tell whether it was gladness she felt—this trouble of excitement at the prospect of going to the Hilyards’. All she knew was that she could not refuse, that something strong was drawing her there, even at this very moment.

“Good! Be ready early, so you’ll be able to spend the day. Somebody will come for you soon after breakfast. Ashbrooke would have driven me over this morning, but I’ve been promising myself a long walk—and it was such a lovely morning! So much like the mornings in England when I was a little girl. I was reminded of it—all the way along. But what have you been doing here? I’d really like to know.”

She nodded toward the small stone pyramid in the hollow at Jo’s feet.

“This here—” She felt a momentary misgiving at the thought of confiding in Miss Milledge. But perhaps it would be all right, after all. Something told her that Milledge, for all her lathlike shape, had a tremble in her for small uncherished things. “This is a—a grave. Crows came here in the spring and took a nest of rabbits. I just came out to see—this morning. I didn’t want to come before, but—” It wasn’t easy to explain clearly why she had come. “I put the stones there for a—”

“A cairn,” Milledge supplied.

“—in amongst the mullein.”

Milledge clapped her hands excitedly in the way she had done that Sunday afternoon when Jo had told her of the Owl Country. “Why—it’s like Stone Henge!” Jo gave her a candid stare. “I used to go there often—you know, where the ancient priests built altars of stone!”

Jo felt a clear simplicity of relief. “I’ve read about it in school.”

“But you can’t possibly know how you looked—on your knees there—and what it brought back to me, my dear. I used to do things—just like that!” Her face brightened as if with an effort. “And now—the mullein and the roses will grow up all around the place and it—it won’t be so hard to look at, will it? I had almost forgotten how it used to feel. We grow up, my dear, and everything changes.”

Jo regarded her solemnly. It wasn’t easy to believe that anyone as old as Milledge could understand such things. Well, not so old, perhaps, but so unfavored. Perhaps she was like Goldy Matthews—not in looks, certainly, because while Goldy was soft and pale as pulled taffy that wouldn’t lace, Milledge was like a reed that had gone black with frost. But they were both excited by little things, awed beyond expression by trifles.

She saw Milledge's long neck tighten as if she were swallowing. They must go somewhere else, Jo thought, and escape from the embarrassment that had thrust itself between them.

"I know where there's some trailing arbutus," she announced. "The flowers are gone now, but there's a whole patch of it, and you could dig up the roots and take them home if you wanted to. There isn't any on your side of the lake. I know because Goldy and I have been all over and it doesn't grow down there. It isn't far from here."

Milledge clasped her long hands. "I don't care how far it is. Let's walk miles!"

"It's down toward Goldy Matthews' place."

"Hadn't you better tell your mother we're going?" Milledge suggested.

"I did the dishes and swept up," Jo said carelessly. "Anyhow, she knows I'm with you. Let's cut across over here—" she pointed north—"then we can go through the sheep pasture and get to the road. The patch is in from the road—about halfway from our place to the Matthewses'—but it's all on the way to the Hilyards'."

"It's all on the way to the Hilyards'!" Milledge echoed, and again Jo thought the shape of the woman's face changed in a curious manner.

Even when, after half an hour, Jo had led her in across the deep, redolent carpet of needles under the jack pines to the place where the arbutus struggled, disorderly, tough, patiently green and waiting for its sweet blossoming again next spring—even after that time Milledge had still a look of strangeness about her that was disturbing. But they were soon at the Matthews gate, and there was Goldy, scouring milk pans in the sun, with three kittens and a puppy frolicking about her.

Jo gave a plaintive, cadenced whistle that made Miss Milledge start sharply, so near to the note of the hermit thrush it was. Goldy came running, then halted at the sight of Milledge and began wiping her hands self-consciously on her apron.

"This is Miss Milledge—from over to Hilyards', Goldy," Jo announced.

Milledge's eyes were shining and young under their crimped lids. She took Goldy's fumbling hands eagerly into her own. "I'm Hannah Milledge," she said, "—or just plain Milledge. And I'm glad to meet you, my dear!"

Goldy made an awkward attempt at a curtsy and darted an anxious, inquiring look at Jo.

"We were over at the arbutus patch," Jo explained.

"We've been having the most glorious walk," Milledge put in. "We've come to see if you won't join us. Jo says she'll go along with me as far as the Owl Country if you'll come too."

Goldy looked again at Jo and then glanced toward the house. "I'd better tell Ma," she said eagerly. "She doesn't like me to go down there, but if you're along—"

Jo watched her run up to the green-slabbed house among the pines. "She's afraid of everything," she said with casual tolerance, "—everything but deer. She's not afraid of them. They come right up to her sometimes if she sits still in the woods. But she doesn't understand other animals at all. Snakes or toads. She's afraid of 'em."

Milledge stared at Jo again in that fixed, rapt way of hers. But Goldy was already out of the house and was coming down the path.

"I can go! But I got to get back in an hour."

They set off along the tawny gravel road where full-leafed balsam and poplar and elm thrust out from the evergreens and met overhead. The sun stabbed through and made stepping-stones of shadows on the road, and this might have been a nice thing to point out to Milledge, Jo thought, but the woman's stiff, resolute walk reminded her again that she was from the Hilyards', after all, and was different from the people on the north shore. When she could see Milledge's eyes she was comfortable enough, but when Milledge walked with her nose imposingly straight ahead it was another matter.

They were soon in the peat land, and the walking there was difficult, with rich, wild-grape vines and woodbine matted over leaning, hoary poplars, fern curling like green fingers in an eternal shade, grotesque fungi scalloping out from the trunks of doomed trees, and underfoot the treacherous webby plush of moss that covered ages of rotting growth.

"Look!" Jo cried suddenly, and the others turned to see, deep in the waxy green of motionless fronds, a shy colony of nodding trilliums.

"They're beautiful!" Milledge exclaimed.

"Kind of," Jo admitted grudgingly, "but I don't like them. They hang their heads as if they were ashamed to show their faces."

Perhaps that was being too forward, she thought uneasily. It was the kind of thing she might have said to her own people and never given it a thought.

Besides, it wasn't entirely true. She felt sorry for the nodding trilliums and loved them, which was different from liking or admiring. But it was too late to explain herself now—it would seem an apology. Anyway, Milledge was smiling when Jo looked up at her—and it was Goldy's timid little penny of a face grown long and elderly.

They had come to the lily pond at last, a still, enchanted place in the prodigious tumult of the forest. Deep-breasted trees and shrubs, cloaked with nightshade in bloom, bindweed and wild grape, walled the pool about. Jo found the mossy log she had walked on before and pulled the overhanging branches aside for Goldy and Milledge to follow.

The sun glistened here upon a translucent green jade depth flecked by the yellow globes of cow lilies, the gleaming white disks of water nymphs, and their flat, oily leaves. Far down in the glassy darkness the sinuous stems appeared to be alive and rhythmically swaying. Frogs, quiescent yet alert, basked on the lily pads, or with a lengthening of emerald and cream bodies twinkled down into the luminous day-night of the water and coasted smooth and swift into oblivion.

"The Slough of Despond!" Milledge exclaimed. "I've walked in these woods so many times—I don't see how I *could* have missed this."

"You have to have eyes to see things," Jo observed hardily, remembering something Phineas Baggott had told her.

Milledge colored, then laughed. "And a heart to know them," she said as if to herself. "Have you ever come here by moonlight?"

"No-o," Jo confessed, "but I'd like to."

"Oh, you wouldn't!" Goldy said in a hushed voice. "I wouldn't come here at night for anything! I'll bet this is where Baggott's pack comes on nights when there's a moon."

"Huh!" Jo said staunchly, and looked across the brilliant water to the wild green reaches of forest beyond. Then she turned upon Goldy with a violence that appalled Miss Milledge. "And even if they did, what of it! I'd like to run with them myself some moonlight night. I'd like to see what it is they see. I'd like—" She caught her breath sharply and stared at Milledge in consternation. What had she been saying? But Milledge had the strangest, faraway look in her face.

Goldy had gone quite white. "I've got to go home now," she said weakly.

“Perhaps it would be best,” Milledge sensibly replied.

They began to walk back, Jo following the other two, a sense of shame and defiance battling within her.

They spoke little, and even after Miss Milledge left them and went her way Jo and Goldy hurried along the road in silence. It was not until late in the evening that Jo gave her mother an account of where she had been that morning. She didn’t know that Miss Milledge, at almost the same moment, was telling the Hilyard family of her adventure. They were all seated on the porch in the twilight after dinner. “Do you know,” she said finally, “that Jo Porte is a young pagan!”

“Too bad she isn’t a little older,” Ashbrooke drawled brazenly. “It might be exciting, eh, Royce?”

In the shadows Milledge blushed and primly tightened her lips.

2

The sunlight droned about them, here between the midsummer earth and sky, on the upland reach the Hilyards had never thought arable. Dorothy sat with her back against one of the reddish boulders, her eyelids drooping, but Jo leaned forward to feel herself become rapturously lightheaded from the giant sense of space here on the wasteland. It was a high, rock-studded ground, a freakish outcropping, a sport; it rose from fertile pastures and fields on the east and south and west, and from the serrated, rich dark of timberland on the north. To Jo it was the Stone Field, a name she had given it years ago when, sitting beside her father on trips to Carthia, she had had glimpses of it from the county road.

East and south the world undulated, fell far and away to billows of remote dark blue that wheeled the horizon around like the margin of some unimaginable sea. White swan clouds sailed high and dreamfully slow in the still blue of the middle heaven; near by the air was windless and fluted with heat.

A dragonfly traced its glittering path of silver and azure between Jo and the sun, stood sharply fixed in space for an instant, then was gone. The rhythm of grasshoppers and crickets zigzagged hot and unbroken in the short rough grasses where only weedy flowers grew. White and yellow butterflies hovered flimsily above the ragged spikes of purple blazing-stars,

and here and there a downy bee lumbered across a silky head of rabbit-foot clover.

Jo, for a little while, had been really unaware of Dorothy, conscious only of this high, murmurous space of land that sloped away to the indigo rim of the world. Now Dorothy yawned and sat forward. She took up a handful of pin cherries from the basket at her feet and stuffed them into her mouth.

"Maybe we'd better go back," Jo suggested. "Your mother will be—"

Dorothy spat out the cherry seeds. "I'm not going! Mother'll see enough of me from now on. I think it's just terrible that I can't go back to boarding school in September. We aren't so darn poor that—"

"Maybe they'll let you go after all," Jo offered by way of comfort, without much real sincerity in the thought. Why should she always be soothing Dorothy in her petty discontents? Why, anyhow, were they friends now, she and Dorothy? It had been like this ever since Milledge had sent for Jo, on Dorothy's homecoming, and had insisted on her staying all night at the Hilyards'.

"They won't let me go!" Dorothy fretted. "I know—because Mamma cried so when she told me about it, and I know she meant it. It's going to be simply *awful*!"

"Why, I'd love to go to high school—even in Carthia."

But it was as if Dorothy had not even heard Jo's wistful outburst. "Everybody will *know* I'm there because Dad can't afford to send me back to Sister Anastasia's!" she cried indignantly, and leaned back once more against the stone to nurse her grievance in silence.

"But Royce'll be making money next year, won't he?" Jo asked. "Maybe he'll give you the money to go away. If you only have to wait a year—"

Dorothy laughed cynically. "How much money will he make at teaching? Imagine—teaching! Besides, he'll save every nickel so he can marry Teresa as soon as she's through college. She wears his frat pin—and you should just *see* her when she's with him. You'd think she owned him already. I don't see how anybody as smart as Royce is can be crazy about Teresa!"

"She's awfully pretty," Jo faltered.

She leaned forward, chin on palm, and gazed south to the field where Royce was cultivating corn. He had just turned back north again, and across

the glowing stillness came the sound of his voice as he spoke to the horses. Even at this distance his shoulders had an irked look.

"She thinks it's terrible that he's working on the farm this summer to save the wages of an extra man," Dorothy added. "Of course he *does* hate it, but it's sickening the way she moans over him! Anyhow, I don't think she's so pretty. You're getting much prettier than she is. Why, your hair is the color of amber—and it's like wavy satin!"

Jo blushed with gratitude. This was how it always was—she would feel repulsed by Dorothy one moment and irresistibly, warmly drawn to her the next.

"Look!" Jo said, glad of the distraction. "Royce is waving at us!"

"I'll bet he's just cooked!" Dorothy giggled. "Imagine that big lump teaching literature! He'll have all the girls in love with him." She got up. "Let's take him some cherries."

At the same moment there came a sound like rapid, muffled thunder from behind them. Jo turned in alarm. Not forty rods away, coming straight toward them at a frenzied gallop, appeared seven or eight cream-yellow bronchos, as if they had sprung up terrifyingly out of the earth.

Dorothy screamed and looked about her wildly, then collapsed into a helpless heap. Jo's action now was automatic, unpremeditated, rising from some spring of selflessness within her heretofore unguessed. She waved her arms at the frantic horses, then flung herself down upon Dorothy and covered the smaller girl's body with her own. Immediately over and beyond them hurtled the straining, mad, yellow apparitions. In her terror Jo barely felt the glancing blow of the single hoof which struck her left shoulder. The roar in her ears ebbed swiftly into black silence.

Someone was carrying her in arms that were strong and gentle and close about her. Jo could hear Dorothy weeping and babbling incoherently as she ran alongside—and then Royce telling his sister firmly to shut up. There was a deep-scored pain in her shoulder now as if a knife were whittling at the bone. She buried her teeth in her underlip and shut her eyes hard, but it did no good at all and the sob came out shamefully.

"Go ahead, Jo! Bust right out if you feel like it!"

Royce's laugh had a strange, shaken sound as he moved her carefully to an easier position in his arms. She drew a deep breath, turned her face and looked up at him. His khaki shirt was open halfway down his chest and his face and body were burned one even mahogany color, with a transparency

unlike the tough, leathery brown of the farm men Jo knew. He smelled damp and sunny and salty all at once, not acrid as Ned Larkin did, for example. He looked down at her and grinned.

"Snapping out of it, eh? Dorothy, pull yourself together and run on ahead. Have them phone for Doc Murdoch. Get going!"

The pain was still there, gnawing at her left shoulder, but it didn't matter so much now. She was being carried close to Royce Hilyard's body. She could hear his heart beating—so like her own. She turned her cheek against his shirt and closed her eyes. . . .

Voices were speaking in low, excited tones, and blinds seemed to be drawn before the windows, for everything was dim and cool. Someone was lightly changing icy cloths on her head—and then Milledge was speaking.

"Perhaps you had better go upstairs and lie down, Mrs. Hilyard. The doctor will be here any minute now."

"Oh, dear! This has been such a shock!" Mrs. Hilyard's voice quavered tearfully.

"Yes, you'd better go and stay with Dorothy." That was Mr. Hilyard's voice.

"Well, if you think so, maybe I shall. I thought—"

"Go along," Mr. Hilyard broke in. "It'll only upset you more if you stay, and Murdoch hasn't any patience with hysterical women."

Mrs. Hilyard whimpered. "Hysterical! You might be a little more considerate, I think, at a time like this. We might have *lost* Dorothy."

"We damn well might have if it hadn't been for Jo. I can't imagine any of your Sister Anastasia brats doing what—"

Royce spoke quickly: "Better go along, Mother. The less confusion the better."

Jo heard footsteps retreating. Then someone drew a chair to the bedside and lifted her hand gently. She turned her head a little and looked at Mr. Hilyard. He smiled down at her.

"Feeling better, eh? Think you could swallow a little cold water?" He placed his hand under her head and held the glass to her lips. "There—that ought to help. Just take it easy, now. Doctor Murdoch is coming to see you."

Jo felt tired once more from the pain, so tired that she wanted to leave it again and go into that immense, soft darkness.

". . . should have mended that fence last week . . . deer flies are driving them crazy these days. . . ."

Royce's voice was acutely rueful, then far away and muffled. Presently there were other voices coming from the hall—and then Doctor Murdoch was standing beside the bed. She remembered him from last winter when he had come out to see her mother after she had had that pain in her heart. She would never forget his stiff red mustache and his twinkling sharp eyes.

"Well! What have you been up to, young lady?" he greeted her heartily. "Trying to stop a stampede, eh?" He sat down on the chair Mr. Hilyard had left. "We'll just have a squint at this shoulder. Hm-m-m—hurts a little, doesn't it? Yep—got a young bruise there, all right. You might just bring me a glass of water, Miss Milledge. We'll ease this pain a bit first. Then we'll have a good look at it. Raise a blind or two—we'll need light."

The doctor went to a table and opened a shiny black bag. He had his back turned, but Jo caught a glimpse of some glittering silver things as he laid them out on the table. Milledge came back and knelt beside the bed.

"Take this, my dear. You'll feel better."

Jo could barely swallow the capsule with the thick dryness of her throat. For a long time, it seemed, Doctor Murdoch talked with Mr. Hilyard about the unprecedented spell of dry weather and its probable effect upon the crops. But he came at last and sat down again with his sharp eyes fixed upon Jo's face.

"Well—now we'll have another look. It won't hurt so much this time. Hm-m-m—you came out of this in pretty good shape, young lady. No bones broken—a little bruise there on the shoulder blade, but that'll be all right. We'll have to look after that flesh wound, though." He got up and turned to Milledge. He lowered his voice, but Jo heard what he said, although everything was becoming hazy and far away. "I'll use a local and pull it together. It's going to leave a scar, I'm afraid, but we can't help that. Better fix up this couch so she can sleep for a few hours afterwards. She's suffering from shock, too."

A number of voices spoke, all blurred.

"I want to go home," Jo said, and wondered if they could hear her.

"We'll take you home, dear," Milledge assured her.

“Don’t worry,” Doctor Murdoch said. “Everything is going to be all right.”

He took hold of her arm, and she saw now that the sleeve was cut right off her dress. That made her want to cry because it was her best pink gingham and she had worn it out of vanity just to go cherry-picking with Dorothy. But then she looked up and Royce’s face seemed to swim very near to her, with his eyes deeply blue and troubled. He smiled at her and Jo curved up the corners of her lips. Her eyelids felt now like gray moths, but before they came quite down over her eyes she saw a strange thing. It was a spattering of red on the front of Royce Hilyard’s khaki shirt.

Chapter Six

1

The sun glittered through the dazzling fang of an icicle suspended from the roof's edge outside her window. The glare made sorting things in her cedar chest difficult, and Jo got up and pulled the blind down midway. As she did so she observed that the snowy ground was pocked with drippings and that the icicle had shrunk dispiritedly since morning. In all likelihood this thaw would annihilate it, and she would have to begin all over again watching another form with its prisms and its stains of aquamarine and cardinal flower and brindle yellow in the change of hours. And her father would laugh in extravagant glee at her disappointment, for not yet in the four winters since he built this low wing that was her bedroom had she won her bet of one dollar that an icicle would sometime span the distance outside her window from roof to ground. She smiled at herself, thought that she was really too old now—just about a moon's step from nineteen, as Phineas Baggott would say—to keep on being serious about that icicle bet, and went back to the cedar chest.

The chest had been her father's gift to her on her sixteenth birthday. He had built it himself in secret while she was in Carthia in high school during the daytime; he had sawed and planed and joined the wood with a tenderness and an attention to the pattern of knots and grain that no one but Ernest Porte could have given. Stained and varnished and polished, with its hand-wrought copper lock and key, it was a beautiful piece of workmanship, but even if it had been clumsy and pathetic Jo would have wept with delight in it, that morning of her birthday when she had first opened her eyes upon it, because of the love that had gone into its patient fashioning. Ernest had stood, smiling and red and deprecating, while she exclaimed and ran her hands marvelingly over its satin glows and shadows. Since that day it had held her concealable treasures, the cherished tokens of time going, time climbing upward like a vine through childhood and the first vivid air of youth, curiously tendriled and flowered.

Her summer coat of dark blue flannel lay folded neatly at one end of the chest, with a white braided straw hat in a paper bag on top of it, but the remainder of the space was taken up by that miscellany of articles that marked, each in a known and sometimes wistfully amusing way now, her growing. She lifted the disorderly accumulation out upon the floor, wiped the bottom of the chest with a dust cloth, and squatting on her knees began to replace the things with a dreamful abstraction.

The pemmican stone she had found on the beach when she was six, and which her mother had protested was no ornament to the mantel, took its natural place again in one corner, her first grade copy book, resplendent with a gold star, snug up against it. Her last doll, smelling faintly still of the glue that had been used to replace its yellow hair, a little to one side on its bisque head; a little red cane her father had bought her at her first circus in Carthia; a mouth organ she had stolen from Louis Vandermeyer, who had some years later gone to France and had not come back; a string of barbarous beads she had got in trade from a gypsy for her best pair of shoes when she was ten: these things were grouped sociably together once more, with bits of lace and silks and ribbon. A scrapbook of poems she had clipped from papers and magazines, a smudged autograph album, and another containing snapshots with dates and painstakingly explanatory legends beneath came next, and then her high school books and themes bound in brown wrapping paper. In a separate package, done up in tissue paper with blue baby ribbon, was the beautiful little volume of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's poems bound in white kid and lettered in gold, which Laura Keefe had given her for graduation last June.

Sitting back on the rag rug, Jo unwrapped the book and opened it with reverence. "To *My* Jo Porte," ran the hair-fine inscription, "Whom E. B. B. would have loved."

Jo felt the warm flush of gratitude tingle in her cheeks again as she had felt it that day six months ago when she had first read the words Laura had written there. She began to turn the pages, and as always her throat grew full and unbearably tender at the passionate singing voice of one long dead.

. . . The widest land
Doom takes to part us, leaves thy heart in mine
With pulses that beat double. . . .

Her eyes darkened and she closed the book and sat still for a long time in a thought that had no given place in her mind, but was rather like the fanning of a flame over her breast. And while she sat so her hand moved

unconsciously to her left shoulder, her fingers plucking at the seam of her dress.

" '. . . leaves thy heart in mine with pulses that beat double . . .' " she whispered, and knew once more, as she had known the first time she had read the words, their significance for her: Royce Hilyard carrying her off the Stone Field that summer when she was less than fifteen, herself feeling the quick rhythm of her heart pacing his.

There would never be any difference. Never.

Looking back on it now, the years in between commonly even and unnoteworthy, Jo was not sure whether her misfortune in the Stone Field on that hot afternoon had been a blessing in disguise or not. True, she would always carry the ugly scar where one hoof had torn her left shoulder, but her dress covered that, even with short sleeves. But had it not been for that happening she would probably never have gone to high school in Carthia. For Mr. Hilyard had insisted on sending his man to the Portes' each morning with the car that took Dorothy to school. Jo's father had protested at first, making light of what Jo had done, but Mr. Hilyard had insisted and there had been no further argument.

Her mother, of course, had offered no single word of opposition. On the contrary, as soon as Mr. Hilyard had left after announcing his intention to send Jo to high school with Dorothy, she had complained bitterly that Ernest Porte was content to see his daughter grow up and become a farm drudge without book learning or anything else to make life a little less unbearable. Jo's father had said very little in response to that, beyond the fact that he had found life tolerable enough and had never had any schooling worth mention. But that had been only in self-defense, as Jo knew instinctively at the time, and would never have occurred to him had there been any doubt of Mr. Hilyard's carrying out his plan. Jo's father was as anxious as anyone else concerning her future. He wanted her to "get on" and take her place alongside the best of them, as he himself often said, but he didn't want to be beholden to anyone, especially to a woman like Alda Tate, who set herself above her neighbors.

Jo thought again, more deeply, of those years going. It was during them that she became aware, first with baffled chagrin, then with amused tolerance, and finally with pity, that her mother looked forward to Ned Larkin's return each spring in a mood of fluttering, youthful expectancy. To be sure, Mabel would bridle and blush and listen raptly to the tall stories of his wanderings in the south for only a day or two, and after that she would

lapse into her old, colorless self and be as impatient with his preposterous yarns as Ernest was, and the atmosphere in the household would be normal once more. Jo had puzzled intensely over this phenomenon that accompanied Ned's spring advent and wondered if it had existed all through her childhood, before she had taken notice of it. And this last year, when her mother had become markedly more frail, less able to do, Jo had perceived that the ludicrous, jaunty, bow-legged Ned, coming back to these closed-in woods from the southern blue, had been to Mabel Porte a heady tonic of romance, piquant, innocent, and absurd. The dawning of this knowledge had made Jo apprehensive on her own account. She saw, frighteningly, a likeness between Ernest Porte and—Lute Billings, for example. In her narrow life, was there anything more in store for her than her mother had been given?

Going to school every day with Dorothy Hilyard had not greatly broadened Jo's acquaintance with the outer world. Dorothy, not surprisingly, had been ashamed of Jo's made-over, dowdy clothes, and directly her own social niche in the school was determined, she made no effort to draw Jo into it.

Had it not been for a happy circumstance, indeed, Jo would have found her life in Carthia lonely enough. She had gone to the town library at noon to find a copy of *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, only to learn that the book had been taken out. Every day for a week she had gone back at the noon hour to ask for the book. She couldn't know, of course, that Laura Keefe, the small, neat, dun-colored bird of a woman who was the librarian, had begun to take an interest in the slim, straight-shouldered girl with the striding country walk, the blunt-spaced features, the finespun skin where childish freckles were paling out and the startling, deep-water-colored eyes with their fans of lashes. What she did know was that one day Laura Keefe was standing above her where she sat reading at the table and was, unbelievably, inviting her to tea on the following Sunday afternoon.

"We have a number of interesting old books—curiosities, really—that belonged to my father. I'm sure you'd like to look at some of them."

To Jo's confused protest that she lived in the country and had no way of coming to town on a Sunday afternoon, Laura Keefe assured her that she knew the way to the Porte farm and would love to drive out for her and feast her eyes upon the autumn colors in the woods about Fallen Star Lake. She would have her brother come along for company.

Jo would never forget that Sunday afternoon visit to the Keefe home in Carthia. Laura and her brother were a strange couple. Their father had died

when Laura was in her early twenties—her mother she could not remember—and had left them a comfortable income and an ugly, generous old house on one of the back streets of the town. Alec had suffered an attack of infantile paralysis when he was sixteen years old and had never fully recovered the use of his legs. Laura, in her middle thirties, was resigned to an existence of tireless attendance upon the brother she adored; Alec, with his remote, dark face, inhabited a house of dreams and devoted himself to the poems of John Donne and the history of his times. So much, at least, Jo had learned on her first visit, but there had been many visits after that when they had spent afternoons and evenings with the Brontës and Jane Austen and had read aloud from Thomas Hardy.

Her growing friendship with Laura and Alec Keefe, however, was not without its shadow. The neighbors had taken no pains to conceal their feeling that Jo Porte was in some obscure way beginning to look down upon the humbler souls who had been her father's and mother's friends for years. Goldy Matthews had reported something of what was being said, though her own devotion to Jo was even more worshipful than ever. And once, when Mabel Porte was ill, Mrs. Dibney had spent an afternoon with her and had hinted that Jo was "stepping out with the quality" and was becoming "quite the lady" since she had begun attending school in town. Jo's father might laugh it off as much as he liked, and her mother might advise her to pay no attention to what people had to say, but Jo knew that the neighbors had begun to look upon her as different and removed from themselves, and were acting as if they did not quite trust her. But there seemed to be nothing she could do or even wished to do about it. There was something within her that had always held away from people, that could be given only to the solitude of earth and sky, no matter what the season.

It was in this knowledge that she took refuge last summer, when it became clear that she must remain at home because of her mother's ill health. Laura and Alec Keefe deplored the necessity—particularly Laura, whose influence had secured Jo the promise of a small position at the library, a beginning only, but still a beginning, of that broader life the Keefes believed she deserved. Jo's disappointment had been greater than they could ever guess, for in her loyalty to her family she would not permit them to see the extent of her sacrifice as she herself saw it.

Her mother called now from the other room, where she was resting on the sofa, and Jo got up from her knees, replaced the tissue paper parcel in the chest, and closed the lid.

“I was just wondering if you’d gone to sleep in there,” her mother said in the gentle way she had now. “You were so quiet.”

“No. I was just reading.”

“Poor little Jo!”

Jo hurried through into the kitchen. Her mother’s shrill impatience in times gone by was preferable by far to the commiserating attitude she took now, which hinted always that Jo’s giving up of her opportunities was too much of a sacrifice for a woman who was middle-aged and done. If she had lingered her mother would have mentioned again that the doctor had said that by spring she would be her old self again, that this trouble with her heart would pass with “the other” passing. Jo could not bear it today.

2

It was evening of that day. Her skates were slung over her shoulder; she carried a basket in which lay a dish of raspberry gelatin rich with sliced bananas and oranges and chopped walnuts. The Vandermeyers had given a skating party every year between Christmas and New Year’s as far back as Jo could remember. The kitchen table, she knew, would be piled high with the cakes, sandwiches, pickles, and baked beans contributed by the neighbors. Nearly everyone in the district would be there, with the older folks playing five hundred while the young fry skated in the cleared space about the bonfire offshore. Already, as she stepped from the house, she could see the blaze to the southeastward.

The winter moon feathered the snow where it lay heavy on the pine branches and made a pale blue twist of the road that ran along the lake shore. Jo was glad now that she had been able to persuade her father not to leave her mother because he would have hitched up Della and driven over in the cutter, and then the beauty of this December night would have passed too quickly.

In her musings this afternoon, she reflected now, it had seemed to her that nothing of importance had happened during the past few years. But she had been wrong. When she left the road and cut across the snow-covered channel between Spite Island and the shore, she glanced back northward and saw in the moonlight the solid dark curving land that had not long since been all Hilyard property, unbroken. The Torkelsons were still renting, but

Brade Toufang owned his quarter section now; Sam Broatch, comparatively new, was still a tenant raising garden truck and raspberries on eight acres, but the combined efforts of the Vandermeyer clan had secured for them a half section of good farming land snugly protected by Hilyard timber. The decline of the Hilyard fortune, which had enabled these people to become landowners instead of tenants, had actually given a different appearance to the shore line, Jo thought now. It looked less proud, less far-reaching. Was she glad or sorry? She could not tell.

A two-mile walk, then the shore again, and she passed the Vandermeyers' stable, neighbors' horses inside, neighbors' sleighs outside, a look of coziness and cheer over these things.

The low-beamed kitchen was redolent of years of cooking, of wooden washtubs, of lye and yellow soap, and of pine and birch fires that had seldom been permitted to die out in the range. The oak planked floor was wavy from the coming and going of many feet and its two braided rag mats were faded from countless washings. Except for one or two things, this kitchen was the kitchen of every family on the farms in the Hilyard tract. It expressed the humble contentment of half a hundred souls whom chance and an old man's whim had gathered together on this fringe of a country's last wilderness.

Mrs. Dibney and old Mrs. Vandermeyer, Charlie's mother, were busy at the table unwrapping dishes and stacking them.

"Well—Jo!" old Mrs. Vandermeyer exclaimed as the door opened. "You got here, then! We'd started to think you wasn't comin' after all, when you didn't come in the Matthewses' sleigh. Did you—"

"I couldn't come with Goldy because I had to set bread," Jo explained. "So I walked over. It's a gorgeous night!"

"Perfect for the skate. And how's everything to home, Jo?"

"Pretty well, thanks. Mother says she'll be over to see you as soon as there's a nice day if she's feeling well enough."

"I'll be expectin' her," the old lady said cheerily. "And she'll be feelin' better, too—that's the way it is at her age."

Mrs. Dibney smiled. "It sounds so funny to hear Jo saying 'Mother' and 'Dad' the way she does now. I can't seem to get used to it. But I s'pose high school *does* change a person—and 'Ma' and 'Pa' *is* sort of old-fashioned."

“I don’t see no difference,” old Mrs. Vandermeyer put in stoutly. “It’s all in what you’re used to, like everything else.”

Jo flushed. There was probably no malice in what Mrs. Dibney had said, she told herself. They all knew what had made it possible for her to attend school in town. And it was not that they really begrudged her the opportunity, either. But somehow—it was almost as if they were trying to identify her now with the Hilyards. She hated the thought. All through her years of going back and forth to school she had suffered the pull and repulsion of Dorothy Hilyard, her own humility following on the very heels of her contempt.

She had set her basket on the table. “Here’s the fruit gelatin, Mrs. Vandermeyer. I hope it will be enough.”

“Land sakes!” the old woman exclaimed. “We’ve got enough of everything to feed a regiment! Just leave it there and we’ll look after it. Your ma had no call to be goin’ to all that trouble, and her feelin’ the way she does.”

“I made it myself,” Jo told her.

“Well—anyhow—you’d better get along down to the lake if you’re goin’ to be on time for the skatin’. They’ll be comin’ in like a pack o’ hungry wolves before we know it.”

“Lute just got here about ten minutes ago,” Mrs. Dibney said. “He’d been doing some business in Carthia and drove straight here from town. He was disappointed ’cause you weren’t here, Jo, and he was goin’ to drive over for you, but we told him you’d probably already be on your way ’cross the lake.”

Old Mrs. Vandermeyer’s eyes roved with frank, pleased astonishment over Jo’s figure.

“I declare!” she exclaimed. “You’ve got as good a bust now as I had at your age, and you don’t see many of ’em nowadays! It seems only last week that you were running around barefooted. How time does fly!”

Jo laughed. She went to the mirror that hung above the sink and pushed a rich, darkening wave of hair into place beneath her béret.

“The Hilyard boys came, both of them,” old Mrs. Vandermeyer went on, beaming. “I think it was real nice of them.”

Jo saw the startled widening of her own eyes and was glad that she had her face averted. She had known that Royce was home for the holidays. He

had been teaching in a high school in the southern part of the state, and it was common talk that he was coming to Carthia next year to join the academy staff. Mr. Jaffey, Teresa's father, was chairman of the board of directors. But that Royce should be here—tonight . . .

A burst of laughter rose above the cheerful hubbub of voices in the living room.

"Did you ever hear such a laugh as that Brade Toufang has!" Mrs. Vandermeyer exclaimed.

"He sure laughs loud enough when he's winning," Mrs. Dibney observed.

"Or when he's had a drink too many," old Mrs. Vandermeyer chuckled.

"He's in fine fettle tonight, and no mistake. He was teasing Goldy before she went out—kidding her about all the boy friends she'll have when she starts working in Carthia. She got kind of mad." Mrs. Dibney laughed.

Jo's thoughts were troubled with Goldy as she left the house. She hadn't changed much from the shrinking, unguessable creature Jo had known all through the years. Now that she was going to work for Mrs. Knight, in Carthia, after New Year's, she had become more hauntingly strange than ever. It was as if she expected some magic to come out of her new life, even though most of her meager earnings would be used to lighten the burden Tom Matthews was carrying.

Thinking of it filled Jo with an apprehensiveness she could not define. It seemed to her that Goldy was even now facing some nameless peril before which she was helpless.

The bonfire offshore was like a great red and smoky-gold target toward which the shadowy arrows of the skaters darted continually, darted and glanced away as if deflected by some invisible obstacle. The moonlight was a pale mesh over everything, extending beyond fire and skaters to a silvery, retreating mystery of frozen space and wheeling dark horizon.

Laughter and voices, shrill or muffled, rose above the click and glide and slurred scrape of skates. Jo found a log on shore a little distance out of the radius of the firelight and sat down. Nobody had noticed her come down to the beach, but from her vantage point she could easily recognize faces as they swept past, rosily illumined for an instant and then blotted, to come clear and swift again in moonlight.

When Goldy Matthews came by, snuggled close under Ashbrooke Hilyard's shoulder, Jo felt no surprise, but rather a dull and sad vindication of her fears. She had known with a relentless certainty that Goldy would be skating with Ashbrooke; she had even known just how Goldy would look—as if, and Jo shrank from the very thought of it, there were a naked pulse beating in her eyes!

There wasn't enough kindness in all the world, Jo felt instinctively, to reward that look. A bleak feeling came over her now, and she wished she had not come; she had even forgotten for the moment that somewhere near by Royce Hilyard was skating and that she would not be able to escape seeing him.

"Jo!"

She glanced up and saw Lute Billings standing over her, a little out of breath. He steadied himself with one hand on her shoulder and sat down on the log.

"What are you hiding here for?" he demanded. "I was just going up to the house to see if you—"

She laughed and patted his knee. "Come on! Help me on with my skates. I've had a rest, and now I feel like skating on my head!"

She was a little ashamed of her giddy excitement when she saw that it spread immediately to Lute. While he masterfully laced up her skating shoes, he laughed with a loud confidence that proclaimed to everyone going by that there was between him and Jo some droll understanding nobody else could share.

But in a moment, when they were flying over the ice together, Jo thought of nothing but the exhilarating joy of this most magnificent, untrammeled speed. She knew herself to be a better than average skater, and although Lute was inclined to be ponderous, her buoyant recklessness caught him up in its mood. Five and then six times they completed the circle between the bonfire and the fringe of white darkness, people shouting to them, Jo shouting back in abandoned gaiety. She saw Teresa's peacock-blue toque with its shag of tassel, like a brief will-o'-the-wisp against the firelight; she heard Teresa's plaintive, apologetic laugh for her clumsiness; she saw the tall dark column of Royce Hilyard's figure close to Teresa, supporting her; she heard him laugh indulgently. She saw Teresa giving up at last and hobbling off the ice, not with Royce now but with Ashbrooke holding her arm.

"You can't get away with this, Lute!"

Royce had swept down upon them and with an exaggerated scowl clapped his hand on Lute's shoulder. And with creditable grace Lute grinned and released his hold on Jo's arm. Royce then took a firm grip on her hand and swung her about in a half circle before they struck off together southward, away from the fire.

Although she had danced with him two years ago at Teresa's Christmas party, it was the first time that Jo had skated with Royce, and for a minute or two the power and grace of his motion, so effortlessly in harmony with her own, left her breathless with the thrill of discovery. It was an impersonal, spontaneous delight she felt in those few moments—Royce just then might have been anyone she had met for the first time. She threw back her head and looked up at him in the moonlight, her laugh ringing out of a clear well of pleasure.

"Girl, you're marvelous!" Royce cried excitedly. "How does it happen we never skated together before? It's an outrage!"

She wished he had not spoken. It set up a tremble within her, an awareness of him that threatened for an instant the flowing rhythm of her body. She bit, smiling, down into her lip and with an effort of her will continued serenely on, stroke after long gliding stroke, while Royce drew her arm more securely into the crook of his elbow.

"It's a swell party," he went on eagerly, "but there's nobody here that compares with you on skates! What do you say to exploring a little? The lake's clear almost to our place after you get over the rough stretch around this bend."

"I don't mind," Jo said, and because her voice sounded unnatural and high she went on quickly, "I would have skated all the way over from our place, but the ice is like a relief map north of Spite Island."

"It is?" He looked quizzically down at her. His features were plainly traceable in the thin, electric brilliance of the night, and she could see now that his expression changed as if he were suddenly startled, and then as if he were puzzling over something. He continued with a little note of bafflement that was almost annoyance, "I hadn't realized that you're grown up! When did that happen, anyhow?"

Her heartbeat quickened in the consciousness that although he had tried to speak jokingly there was a new interest in his tone; even last summer, if

he noticed her at all, it was with the kindly patronage of an adult toward a child.

"Well," she replied, tilting her head, "I'll be nineteen in February! And you won't be twenty-seven until August."

At that she drew a quick, regretful breath. It had sounded—well, not like herself. She looked sternly ahead, but Royce only laughed.

"You're as bad as Dorothy. She has a mania for remembering ages."

They had come to a riffled stretch of ice now and separated until they were across it. When they joined hands again Royce exclaimed fervently, "You're like a bird, Jo! Like a—swallow!"

"You're not so bad yourself," she told him matter-of-factly. "Though I s'pose you'd be a black gull, wouldn't you?"

They both laughed, Jo nervously, Royce uncertainly as if his thought had become overlaid by something else.

"So you're through school and everything now, are you?" he asked a little abruptly after a moment. "Oh, yes, of course—you and Dotty graduated together. It's a wonder Dot ever got through, the nitwit! But she'll land herself a husband soon, I hope."

He seemed to be talking rather at random, Jo thought uneasily. There was a difference in the mood between them now that made her tense and mysteriously unhappy; with every instinct quivering and alert to his presence, she sensed a change, a curious rigidity, in him.

"She's back from Chicago, isn't she?" Jo asked politely—inanely, since she knew very well that Dorothy had returned for Christmas.

"Oh, yes. She had quite a gay time there, I understand, with our cousins."

They skated in silence for a distance, and Jo, glancing up once, thought she had never seen the sky so warm, so purple-black, and infinitely deep in winter, the moon just there, within reach as in summertime. Royce guided her nearer shore.

"I s'pose we'll have to turn back soon," he said, "but let's rest for a minute first."

Where a flange of rock thrust out from the beach Royce helped Jo seat herself. Then, as he was about to take his place beside her, he touched her shoulder with his hand, lightly as Lute Billings had done, but now

involuntarily she winced away from the contact. Instantly she was filled with contrition for the unintentional gesture. She looked up at Royce and saw his face oddly strained and confused. He sat down on a stone a little above her and glanced about casually at the lake.

"I'm sorry," he said bluntly. "I didn't know—your shoulder is still sensitive."

"It isn't—really," Jo hastened to say, the words stumbling. "It's just—oh, don't think about it, please!"

She lifted her face proudly in profile to him, but she could feel him staring at her.

"What are you going to do with yourself now, Jo?" he asked roughly, unwillingly. "Stay at home?"

She turned toward him, and to her own wild disbelief she found herself deliberately studying his mouth, his eyes.

"I have to—until mother is better anyhow," she said calmly.

His expression as he stooped suddenly closer to her sent a mad, sweet ringing through her temples, down through her throat and breast, all the way to her toes, it seemed, like the poignant music of strung wires in a shrill wind.

"Jo Porte," he said with a kind of anger that thrilled her unbearably, "you're—you're beautiful! I—"

His hand had come out toward her, and Jo swayed forward, a rich, full sensation such as she had never before known sweeping over her. Bewilderingly sweet and abandoned . . . this, then, was what had been in store. . . . But now, suddenly, Royce let his hand fall and gave a short, dazed laugh.

"Lord!" he said, and stood up straight. "Come on—let's get back. This moonlight has got me sort of goofy! In another second I would have kissed you!"

Jo felt life draining away from her into dead, cold space, into the blind, onyx glare of the ice beneath her feet. She heard herself laugh inconsequently; she felt Royce give her his hand to help her to her feet.

"That would have been terrible!" she said.

She heard him laugh, shakily, as he had laughed that day in the Stone Field, but with a depth of profound relief in the sound besides. And while

the knot in her heart tightened until she thought it must cut itself in two, she whirled away from him and started for the red eye of the bonfire on the Vandermeyers' shore.

"I'll race you back to the crowd!"

Royce overtook her, and then as though nothing had happened between them they skated back together. They were the last to come in. They spoke little as they changed to their shoes, but on the way to the house Royce said, "Thanks, Jo. I'll never forget—this skate as long as I live!"

She was trying to compose some light reply when Teresa Jaffey rushed out to meet them.

"Royce! Whatever has been keeping you? Hurry into the house and bring Ashbrooke away!"

"What's the matter?" Royce demanded.

Teresa was too excited to explain. "Go and get him out!"

Jo followed Royce through the kitchen and into the inner room where the farmers and their wives had been playing five hundred. At the sight that met her eyes she drew back and held her breath. Ashbrooke Hilyard stood near the door, an ugly look darkening his face, a nervous twitching in his deep-blooded cheeks. On the other side of the room Brade Toufang stood glaring and steadying himself as he thrust his head out toward Ashbrooke, Tom Matthews and Charlie Vandermeyer had crowded close to Brade, and Charlie was talking.

"Cut it out, Brade! You don't know what you're saying."

"I know what I'm sayin'! And I'll say what—"

"This is my house, Brade," Charlie reminded him.

"I'll say what I've a mind to say, no matter whose house it is!" Toufang roared, his eyes fixed upon Ashbrooke. "Nobody asked that slicker to barge in on this party. We don't go bargin' into any Hilyard doin's. We keep to ourselves. We know where we belong. Let them stay where *they* belong." He took a step toward Ashbrooke and his arm came out straight as an iron bar. "An' I don't like the way he holds his blasted face up in the air—smilin' as if we was dirt! Get the hell out o' here!"

Instantly Royce leaped in front of his brother, his face white. In her quick terror Jo sensed within herself a feeling of awe at his rash audacity. She flattened herself against the wall and shut her eyes. She heard women

cry out and men curse. There was a rapid scuffling of feet and the noise of a table overturning. Then Luther Billings was beside her, his hand on her arm.

"Don't be scared, Jo! They'll look after him. He's just drunk."

Jo looked again toward Brade Toufang, but half a dozen men were about him, pinning his arms down and thrusting him backward against the wall.

"Royce!" The name was on her lips before she was aware of what she was saying.

But Royce had his arm about his brother's shoulders and the two were already leaving by way of the kitchen. In a moment they had taken Brade Toufang out of the house, and Mrs. Charlie Vandermeyer was calling to the women to help put the room in order again.

It was not long before the place was full of good, stout eating and drinking, the talk rising again on a pleasant crescendo as if nothing unusual had happened. Brade Toufang's outbreaks were too well known to warrant much discussion.

"I'll go down and talk to Len Hilyard in the morning," Charlie Vandermeyer said. "Nobody was hurt. We'll just let it blow over."

And that was all, except that old Mrs. Vandermeyer declared, "Brade's a good sort, but I'm going to give him a rakin' over when I see him again. It was kind o' too bad about the boys—Royce especially. Well—that's nice cake, whoever made it. I wonder what's in it."

Lute Billings sat with Jo and Goldy, a little apart from the others, but the talk drew them in whether they wished it or not. It brought to Jo strongly the truth of her own being, that she could not remember a time when she had not been of these people. Even now, when they placed her at a tentative distance, they were probably only waiting to see how she would grow. They would never be more than struggling farmers. They were what they were—the small, the unimportant, but life had been fanned into them by some Force that cared magnificently little whether they retained it or not. It cared as little, for that matter, whether princes and kings retained it. She could remember when she had been furious upon hearing these men and women, with herself, called "the natives" by superciliously amused summer visitors, but now she was beginning to take a stubborn pride in them. What if their talk was simple, what if it was sometimes big with bombast? It was all comforting to speaker and listener alike in that it was never in danger of being challenged.

It was only when the talk turned to the Hilyards, and particularly to Royce, that a tremor ran through Jo from head to foot. She would look, stiff and bright, about the room, afraid to fix her glance anywhere especially. And invariably, when her glance returned, it met Goldy's gaze straight on. There was something fairylike in Goldy, something that saw right through your eyes to the glowing, dark thing at the back of your soul.

Suddenly her attention was caught by a remark George Dibney let fall. He had been boasting that by September he, too, would own his land because by that time the Hilyards would be glad to meet him halfway. How did he know? He knew because he had it on good authority that Len was selling a good stretch of shore line and timber between the Vandermeyer and the Broatch place, cheap, to a summer resort outfit. While the others exclaimed and pressed him for details, Jo stared unseeingly ahead. What did all this mean? The Hilyards—the great Hilyards . . .

People were going home, and Lute Billings was lingering beside her, asking her if he might not take her home in his car. Regretfully she told him that she had promised to go along with Goldy Matthews. He looked down at the short light hairs on his red hands, and Jo felt a twinge of discomfort—and then one of rebellion against herself. But his uncrushed resignation was even worse to bear when he replied, "All right, Jo! Better luck next time, eh?"

The moon was a silver globe over the black west edge of the pines when Jo and Goldy started out across the lake. It had been Goldy's idea that they should walk home alone together instead of going in her father's sleigh with the others. Jo knew that it was Goldy's way of contriving to be with her alone for a while. It was as though she were trying to warm her small, cold hands at some flame in Jo Porte. The years while Jo had attended high school in town had been desperately lonely ones for Goldy, as Jo knew from constant tellings. Such devotion was almost more than you could bear, especially in one who was, you were sure, more worthy than you were yourself.

"Weren't you scared stiff?" Goldy asked tremulously while they hurried along, the halos of their breaths showing white in the frosty moonlight. "S'pose Brade had really hit Ashbrooke! He might have killed him, in spite of how big Ashbrooke is."

Not for worlds would Jo have admitted that she, too, had been alarmed when she saw Brade Toufang step menacingly toward Ashbrooke. "Well, he didn't hit him, so there's nothing to worry about."

A horned owl hooted somewhere in the woods on shore, the deliberate, drawn-out, hollow rhythm of the sound making a wild and frightening meaning that you could never quite put into words. Afterwards, the silence was different, the white vacancy of the night was different, pulsating and tense with a hidden presence. Goldy clung nervously to Jo's arm.

"Do you think Ashbrooke likes Tessie Jaffey?" she asked after a long silence for which Jo had been grateful.

"How should I know?"

"Well—" Goldy's hesitation was painful. "It would be—funny, kind of, on account of Royce."

"Royce? Why?"

"She's going to marry him next summer," Goldy blurted out. "Ashbrooke told me when we were skating together. He laughed sort of funny when he said it and kind of gave me a hug. Then he said he just *thought* so, but Royce was awful slow about 'popping the question,' he said. Then he acted as if he was sorry he had said anything to me, and he told me to forget all about it. He smiled, sort of uppish—you know how they all do!"

"Well, they've been going together for a long time," Jo replied in a voice so matter-of-fact that Goldy could not guess the sick falling away into black and empty space that she felt deep within herself.

"But if it's true, I think it's terrible!" Goldy burst out with a passion that brought Jo up sharp in amazement. "And I don't believe it! She's a horrid, jealous, conceited cat!"

"Don't talk silly. Of course he'll marry her. Dorothy always said he would."

"Jo—you don't know how beautiful you looked—the two of you—skating off together!" It was a daring thing for Goldy to say; she seemed quite breathless afterwards.

All at once Jo felt she could stand Goldy's talk no longer. With relief she saw the white birches loom up on her own shore.

"You aren't afraid to go home alone, are you, Goldy?" she asked. "I'm awfully tired." And then, suddenly rueful: "I'll be over to see you tomorrow. And I'll bring around some canned deer meat. We've got far more than we'll be able to use, anyhow."

"Oh, you hadn't ought—"

“You’re sure you won’t be afraid—going the rest of the way alone?”

“No,” Goldy replied hardily. “I hear Sinker barking. I’ll call him when I reach the road.”

“Well, good night, then. See you about noon tomorrow.”

Goldy hurried through the dappled darkness, and soon Jo heard her calling the Matthewses’ dog. Presently there was no more sound of her.

Jo felt that she could not go straight into the house. She halted under the trees for a moment and stood staring across the bleak, dim, snow plain of the lake to the shadowy mass of Spite Island lying wild and alone under the blue-green points of stars. The moon had slipped down the west now, and a faint wind bristled along the snow shelves of the pines overhead. Jo leaned back against a tree and the slight pressure brought down upon her shoulders a soft dusting of snow, silver-gray as sleep.

Part Two

ROYCE HILYARD

Chapter One

1

The somnolence of late August lay mulled and heavy over the timbered slopes and little valley fields. Now and then, as he drove, Royce glanced south to his left and caught glazed blue glimpses of the lake that was the jeweled center of his father's land. It was a long time since he had driven over this north road around Fallen Star Lake from Carthia to the farm, and now it came to him suddenly that he had lost many hours of unmingled beauty in going always over the common, straight way.

An almost incontinent beatitude this afternoon had been the reason for his taking this roundabout route. With Teresa in the seat beside him, he wanted to contemplate uninterruptedly and as sentimentally as he chose the bright future before him, now that the early summer was gone and with it a menacing cloud of doubt.

His disgruntlement at Mrs. Jaffey's insistence upon carrying Teresa off to Europe immediately after her graduation from college had diminished as the weeks passed, and now in his happiness he generously forgave her and even admitted that the month abroad had been a very handsome commencement gift indeed. It would be some time before he himself would be able to show his bride the wonders of the Old World and he was obliged to confess now that he had been somewhat churlish in his resentment toward her mother for thus postponing their wedding day.

But that was all in the past now. Only a week ago he and Teresa had returned from their brief honeymoon in Chicago and had gone to live in the perfect little house, set well back among casual plantings of flowers and trees, which they had found together only a few blocks from the academy in Carthia. Their honeymoon had been necessarily short, since early in September Royce would be assuming his duties as head of the department of literature in the academy, but there would be a next year and a next, and many years after that, for happy travels together.

"Royce, darling, what *are* you dreaming about?" Teresa interrupted his thinking. "We're just crawling along."

He laughed aloud, gave a tuneless little whistle of indulgent amusement at himself, and sent the car forward at a brisker pace.

"That's one of the things I forgot to confess to you, Mrs. Hilyard," he grinned. "I have a habit of falling into a 'brown study' now and then. Very serious. It's a failing common to men who follow academic careers."

"There's no need of your confessing," Teresa replied. "I began to notice it long ago. But I'm not going to permit you to become an absent-minded professor, my dear. If you *must* be a professor, it won't be that kind. Please remember that."

The miles slipped behind them, the tawny gravel ribbon twisting, dipping, and rising as erratically as the Indian trail it must have been in more primitive days. Why, Royce wondered, had his grandfather, when he made this road, followed every coquettish nod of the original beat so faithfully? Was it really, as the old man used to declare, because he did not want needlessly to cut down a single tree, or had it been because of that superstitious fear of "crossing the red man's shadow" which he had mumbled about sometimes in his last years? Either reason, Royce felt with no sense of mawkish sentimentality, would have been sufficient. Particularly, he thought, glancing out, over this mile or two where virgin forest rose in unviolated grandeur. His grandfather, and his father in turn, had preserved these monarchs, while elsewhere in the northern part of the state vast areas had been depleted.

He frowned briefly as he thought of how his father's holdings had shrunk in the past few years. From six thousand acres to little more than three, including the home farm. Taxes and a reduced income had forced Len to sell. But he had sold wisely, Royce reflected, to tenants who respected the timber that fringed their fields, to a reliable resort concern, and, on a small lake farther north, to a number of city families for summer homes. The land he had been obliged to part with was, at least, in good hands.

Royce wished that his brother Ashbrooke had gone into law and eventually into politics, so that he might champion legislation that would provide against such wholesale piracy in timber as was even now going on in the counties to the north. But it was just as well, perhaps, that Ash had preferred to help manage the farm, now that their father was nearing sixty. Royce himself had determined early that he would be no slave to the family tradition. Not, he was forced to admit, that Ashbrooke had shown any great

love for the land. He was rarely down for breakfast, seemed content to saunter out in the late forenoon, spend an hour or so about the dairy, give an order now and then to the foreman, then ride out on his black mare, Cleo, or drive over to the country club for a game of golf. On the other hand, he had been clever recently in his stock market speculations. If he found that he had a talent for finance, what would become of Sky Valley and old Ashbrooke's dream of an empire in little—that dream that had ruggedly graced the name of Hilyard for generations? Royce pulled himself impatiently erect.

"You are now passing through the Hilyard ancestral acres, madam," he announced in stentorian voice, "an estate still comprising some thousands of acres of virgin forests, shimmering lakes, cozy farmsteads and contented herds. Sprung from sturdy pioneer stock, reared in the best traditions of the landed gentry—"

He glanced aside at Teresa. She was all but asleep beside him. Last night's party— He smiled and leaned back in his seat.

It was an odd thing, but now that Teresa was dozing he felt suddenly a privacy, an isolation of thought, that he did not welcome. And he knew why —all too uncomfortably. Not far from here Jo Porte was going about her simple country ways on her father's farm, unaware that one moonlight night last December Royce Hilyard had come perilously close to making an irredeemable fool of himself. But had she been unaware? He disliked the question now as much as he had later that night, when he had lain staring into the darkness of his room at home, hour after hour, striving to rationalize himself out of the unthinkable impulse toward her which still possessed him. Although by morning he was coldly sane, thought of her kept recurring unexpectedly for some days like a shock of dark heat, and more than once he had to remind himself that men had forfeited all that was really worth while in life by succumbing to one moment of folly. It was hard to believe, now, that he had actually had that overwhelming, murky experience. If he had seen Jo Porte again the next day, it was even possible that . . .

He shook himself impatiently and straightened again. He had not seen her then, or any time since, and if he had, he argued convincingly, it would not have mattered.

Plumed dark walls of evergreen rose sheer from the road now where it curved to the southwest, lances of sunlight splitting the gloamy enchantment at sudden intervals. Here and there the solid wedge of trees gave way to grassy wagon ruts which led to hidden farmyards, and in one or two places automobile tires had bitten into the worn grooves. A little farther along,

great hardwoods mingled with the pines, softening the green battlements against the sky overhead. It might have been well, Royce thought with an oddly flashing regret, if he had become better acquainted in latter years with the recessed life on this space of earth that had been in his family's possession for so long.

Well, he had thrust all that behind him now. He was twenty-seven and he had chosen his way of life deliberately. He was not going to be bound to the past as his father had been. This girl beside him was proof of that—this girl of twenty-two, whose golden softness was so close to him that he narrowed his eyes for a second with the knowledge of fulfillment. Already he had begun to reckon with the countless little adjustments that would be a necessary prelude to their life together. In a serious sense they had never had much opportunity to get acquainted, after all. When she was only fourteen Teresa Jaffey had made a sickish pounding all through his body, which had expressed itself in an impulse to wring her neck. Later, their understanding of each other had been margined by brief holidays during which others had been confusingly present—her family, his own family, and a host of undiscouraged swains. He had loved her gay spirit, her lightheartedness, and he had striven never to appear heavy-minded and academic. But for all her frivolousness, Royce knew that Teresa had depths to her nature that had never been sounded. The casual droop of her eyelids, the enigmatic absentness of her smile, the unthinking, willowy sway of her lovely body—back of these, he was convinced, there was a thought that would meet his own in contemplative kind.

Perhaps, after all, there was something unguessable in everyone. It was only last New Year's that he had asked Teresa in so many words to marry him. Under moonlight they had walked together through new-fallen snow away from the house where Ashbrooke was entertaining friends from the city. Royce had looked forward to that moment for a long time. It was rather strange that what he recalled of it now was not the warmth of Teresa's lifted kiss, but the blue-white dazzle of moonlit snow under the bare Lombardies and the rectangles of brilliance from the windows in the house a little distance away. . . . And yet, certainly, there was no thought of Jo Porte in his mind then!

The road flounced from a sunny knoll down into a striated loop of shadow, and with an imprecation Royce swung sharply away from the hobbling figure of an old man directly in his path.

"Hullo!" he called out as he brought the car to a quick stop. "My God, Mr. Baggott, I almost hit you!"

His voice was unintentionally irritable.

“That’s right!” the old man shouted, glaring from beneath his tattered felt hat. “Run me down—and then swear at me! You Hilyards think yourselves the lords of creation, don’t you?”

Royce laughed placatingly. “I wasn’t swearing at you, Mr. Baggott.” He glanced up a narrow side road where turk’s cap lilies blazed in the sun. “How’s your corn crop behaving this summer?”

The old man’s umbrage disappeared instantly. “Well, it might be worse. Come up and look at it if you have a minute.”

Funny old codger, Baggott. His face, under that greasy flat of a hat, was intricately etched with wrinkles and was tobacco brown except where the silky white point of beard covered the chin. White eyebrows hung like eaves over his deeply sunken, wary black eyes.

“I’d like to go up and look at it,” Royce said, “but we’re in a hurry today. We’re due at the farm for supper. I’ll make it some other day. How are the dogs?”

“Healthy enough. I’ve been keeping them chained—too hot to let them run much.”

“I suppose they chase rabbits mostly?” Royce observed, remembering the tales he had heard about the mongrel demons. He wanted Teresa to hear the old man talk.

Baggott gave him a leering, unwholesome wink. “Nobody on earth knows what it is,” he said, and over Royce passed a chilling intimation of something infernal and ghoulish.

But he laughed at himself, with an impatient shrug of his shoulders. “By the way, Mr. Baggott, this is my wife.”

The tattered felt hat came off in a bow that was almost courtly. “There’s little luck in marriage—but I’m wishing you no ill fortune in this.”

Royce smiled at him. “Thanks—for both of us.”

The woods about them were noisy with the small, gay shouting of birds that did not sing, but high and pure above the ado came the plaintive flute of the hermit thrush.

“It’s late in the season for the hermit’s song,” old Baggott remarked. “Some would take that for a good omen.”

“Let’s hope it is,” Royce replied, and lifted his hand in farewell as he started the car.

“What a horrible creature!” Teresa exclaimed when they had gone a little way.

“Part of my grandfather’s heritage,” he said, and stared straight before him.

The road soared up a hill at a needless angle and then, below them, lay the deep, unscarred forest again, the closely knit jungle of pine and hardwood and swamp underbrush which Royce had known since his childhood as the Owl Country. Only the few settlers in the district who were familiar with its pitfalls ever dared venture into it. Five years ago a deer hunter from the city had been lost for two days in that labyrinth before young Gilly Toufang found him and brought him out. Here, Royce knew out of his boyhood, the mists hung throughout the long summer evenings and took eerie shapes at moonrise. Here the rank smell of fern and moss clung for days after a fall of rain. The nights were darker than thought could bear, filled with myriad calls, and even the highest noon was shrouded over by a ceiling of shadow.

This, too, was a part of old Ashbrooke Hilyard’s relinquishment in death, Royce thought to himself. Teresa, looking out into that somber, forbidding density, gave a delicate shudder.

“What a murderous-looking place!” she said. “It looks—why, it looks absolutely prehistoric, Royce, with those ferns!”

2

“Royce, dear!”

It was his mother calling from the head of the stairway. Royce stepped into the hall.

“Yes, Mother?”

“I wish you’d come up for a minute, please.”

He bounded up the stairs and followed his mother to the old tower room where his grandfather had lived out his last years.

“Sit down, darling. We have a few minutes before dinner.”

There was something in his mother's manner that disturbed him as he strode across the room and sank into the great chair before the fireplace.

"Well—what's the trouble, Mother?" he asked her.

"Why must it be trouble, dear?" She leaned back in the chintz-covered chaise-longue that still seemed so out of place here, although the room had been done over long ago and was now Mrs. Hilyard's sitting room.

Fond though he was of her, Royce could not help a feeling of annoyance at the sighing pleasure in her voice. It was the tone she always used when she had secured the complete attention, in private, of any member of her family, and that to Royce was rather tryingly often.

"You look very serious," he said. It was not true. She looked excitedly complacent, he thought—it was the only description adequate.

"I can't hide anything from you, can I?" she asked with the false plaintiveness he was so used to. "I *am* serious, Royce. We're going to lose Dorothy."

"Lose Dorothy? What do you mean?"

Mrs. Hilyard sighed again. "You remember that young man, Clifford Noble, who had a place on one of the lakes last summer? He took Dorothy out a number of times. You must have met him when he was here."

Royce had to think for a moment before he could recall the tall, rather good-looking man who had some sort of manufacturing business in Chicago.

"Yes, I remember him, but—wasn't he—he must have been twice Dorothy's age."

His mother smiled soothingly. "Not quite so bad as that, dear. He *is* older than I'd like—for Dorothy's husband, but—"

"Has it gone as far as that?" His voice was loud with astonishment.

"Please, dear!" In spite of his surprise he could see his mother deftly turning his true reaction, which was merely one of blank incredulity, into something more interesting, into a disapproval with which she would ably cope. This sort of thing was her very life. How had Len stood it so long? Royce wondered. "We must try to be patient. After all—though she is very young—just a child, to me—she is old enough to give some thought to marriage. It saddens me—it doesn't seem possible—and yet—"

"When did you find out about it?"

"I knew she had been hearing from him during the winter, after her visit to Chicago. She read me two or three of his letters. And then he was here again for a couple of weeks in June, before you came back. I confess I was rather taken with him, though I never suspected for a moment that there was anything serious between him and Dorothy. It was really a shock when she came to me yesterday and told me she wanted to marry Clifford."

"Has she spoken to Dad about it?"

"I spoke to him, of course. He was naturally upset at first, but he hasn't said anything about it since. I think he realizes it may be a very good match in spite of the difference in their ages. Clifford is very well off and can give Dorothy everything she wants. After all, that's very important."

Royce tried not to frown. "I see. You're evidently sold on the match yourself, eh? I don't see that there's anything for me to say, except to wish them luck."

"Now, dear—that's not a bit like you. We were all so happy to see you marry Teresa. She's a lovely girl and her family—"

"I know, Mother. After all, this is Dorothy's affair. It's just a little sudden, that's all. I suppose Ash knows about it?"

"Yes. But you know Ashbrooke. He's so easy-going. Nothing ever seems to affect him much. Besides, he likes Clifford."

Royce got up from his chair.

"How soon are they planning to be married?"

"At once, Dorothy says. Don't go down yet, dear. There's something else. Clifford wrote me and explained that he couldn't leave his affairs in the hands of anyone else just now. He was very nice about it. Dorothy wants me to go to Chicago with her—and see her married there. They—"

"He won't come here for her?"

"I *was* a little disappointed at that, too. But I've thought about it—and perhaps it would be just as well if they were married quietly in Chicago. Your father is worrying over the way things have been going for the past couple of years. I know he'd rather not—"

"Well—it doesn't matter, really. I'm being a little unreasonable about it all—and I don't want to be. It's just that I—well, two of us leaving the old nest within a space of only a few weeks—Ash will be the only one left. I guess I'm too damned sentimental."

“Do you think I haven’t thought of that, dear? I’ve had a feeling lately that our lovely home is breaking up. Especially, too, since Dorothy wants to take Milledge with her.”

For a moment Royce couldn’t believe he had heard aright. Milledge, who had been the center, the very core, of the family as long as he could remember, who had mothered them all more than their own mother had done —what was going to become of the place without Milledge? In the past five or six years, since Mrs. Hilyard’s infirmities, fancied or actual, had rendered her incapable of any exertion whatever, Milledge had managed the household with clockwork smoothness and efficiency.

Perhaps something of the real indignation he felt now at Dorothy’s high-handed selfishness showed in his face, for his mother said hastily, “I know what you’re thinking, Royce! But after all, Dotty’s my only little girl, and this may be the last—” her voice broke, her lips quivered as she raised a lacy sketch of handkerchief to them—“the last thing I can ever do for her if what your father says is right.”

Wearily he perceived that she was about to launch a complaint about money again. He glanced around this room that had been his grandfather’s and recalled the bitter tightening of Len Hilyard’s lips when he first beheld the change his wife had wrought here without his knowledge and at considerable expense.

“I guess Dad will manage to muddle through,” Royce said a little sharply, and then, softening at the flicker of hurt on his mother’s face, “I shouldn’t worry if I were you, Mums. And it’s darned decent of you to let Dorothy have Milledge. Though I’m rather surprised that the old girl is willing to go!”

“She’s so *devoted* to the child,” Mrs. Hilyard breathed, her contentment restored. She glanced at her diminutive jeweled wrist watch. “Can it really be after seven? The time always flies in a cozy chat with you, Roycie. But we *must* go down! Give me your hand, dear.” And then she added mournfully as he helped her rise, “Whatever have I done to deserve this weight?”

“Nothing,” Royce thought dispassionately. “That’s precisely it.”

He tucked her babyish, dimpled fingers into the bend of his elbow and together they went downstairs.

3

"But," said Teresa in the living room after dinner, "we'll simply *have* to find somebody to take Milledge's place! Mother Hilyard can't *possibly* manage with just Hedvig!"

She was seated on the floor beside the hassock on which Mrs. Hilyard's squab-plump feet rested in their pouting white kid slippers. Teresa stretched out a hand and affectionately patted one of the bluff insteps. Royce, playing backgammon with Ashbrooke, glanced across at her and smiled, pleased. How rapidly Tess had become a member of the family!

"Well—" Leonard Hilyard, smoking in his deep chair, cleared his throat. There was discomfort on his face. "There won't be so many of us, now—"

But as if he had not spoken Mrs. Hilyard said reluctantly, sweetly, "Hedvig is no earthly good at marketing or planning, it's true. But I suppose I *could* manage—one never knows what hidden strength—" She glanced about vaguely, helplessly, and made a mute gesture with her ringed hand.

"Oh, Mother, now you make me feel just dreadful!" Dorothy cried. "I won't take—"

"Please, dear," Mrs. Hilyard crooned, smiling. "Milledge *feels* that her place is with you. Don't you, Hannah? Much as we shall miss you, I know that you will be happiest with Dotty."

It was a rare occasion on which Mrs. Hilyard used Milledge's Christian name; it was usually an occasion of deep, fine, human feeling, of benevolence, or, as Royce could remember, of uncontrollable temper. He moved a counter and glanced across at the women again.

Milledge sat a little apart from the others, crocheting, a leaf of waning sunlight touching her hands.

"You've been invaluable to us, Milledge," Mr. Hilyard said, a bit heavily. "Losing you will be like losing a right arm."

Milledge blushed. "I'm not so indispensable, really, Mr. Hilyard. But perhaps you would permit a—a suggestion."

"Gladly, Milledge."

She looked at Mrs. Hilyard, who nodded her consent.

"What you need now," Milledge went on, "is a younger person who will be able to take a somewhat larger share of the work than I have been in the habit of doing—and yet have enough intelligence to assume the responsibility of the household—under Mrs. Hilyard's direction, of course. I've been thinking of our little neighbor, Jo Porte. She's a very capable girl and if she would be willing to consider it—"

"Well, now—" Mr. Hilyard began, but he was not permitted to finish.

"We might try her, of course," said Mrs. Hilyard. "I should think she'd be glad of the opportunity to earn a little money without going too far from home."

"That is what I was thinking, Mr. Hilyard," Milledge said gently. "You see—I have got rather well acquainted with Jo. If it were not for her mother's uncertain health, she would be able to go away and—and make something more of herself. As it is, I am sure she would be grateful for a position here, where she could occasionally get over to see her mother. Mrs. Porte is much better than she was last year, but a heart condition is always unpredictable."

"Yes, it is. *I* know," Mrs. Hilyard murmured, and then bravely, brightly, to Teresa she said, "Isn't that Matthews girl doing very well with Mrs. Knight in town?"

"Yes. Mrs. Knight says she's quite pleased with her," Teresa replied quickly, eager to be helpful.

"The country girls are, after all, best for country places," Mrs. Hilyard observed contentedly. "If the Matthews girl satisfies Mrs. Knight, I am sure Jo Porte will come as close to filling Milledge's place as anyone we could get."

Royce was feeling a little irritation on Jo's behalf.

"Goldy Matthews is all right," he said, "but she isn't quite the same sort of person as Jo Porte. If Jo agrees to come here it'll be only because the Portes need the money pretty badly."

"She must have something in common with Goldy," Dorothy said in a tone Royce did not like. It was very close to a smirk. "Goldy has been her best friend for years!"

There was probably a touch of jealousy in Dorothy's attitude. She had certainly not distinguished herself in high school, Royce remembered.

Ashbrooke sent the dice spinning across the board.

“Doubles!” he said. And then with absent dreaminess: “Cute little trick, Goldy. I’ve driven her home two or three times this summer.”

“I don’t see why you think Jo would hesitate to come here, Royce,” Mrs. Hilyard remarked. “Of course, the trouble with these people is that they get a little schooling and begin to think themselves above working for a living. It ruins most of them. Frankly, I was never very enthusiastic about sending her to town with Dorothy every day all those years.”

Royce bit his lip and fixed his eyes grimly on the board. He heard his father clear his throat again. Milledge moved uneasily.

“Perhaps I was wrong in suggesting her,” said Milledge. “It was just a thought I had.”

“Don’t feel that way about it, Milledge,” Mr. Hilyard said. “I like the idea, myself. In fact, I believe I’ll drive over there tomorrow and have a talk with the Portes about it. Maybe you’d like to come along and sort of put in a word or two.”

“Why, of course, Mr. Hilyard!” Milledge seemed pleased.

In September, Jo Porte came to Sky Valley Farm.

Chapter Two

1

This had been exclusively his street, Royce thought, during the little more than a year of his living on it. Even the rainy November twilight and the forlorn last drift of brown leaves along the sidewalk leading from the academy to his own house gave him not a sense of melancholy but one of sweet and natural completeness, a reconciliation to the fact that seasons must come and go. It always seemed especially so on Friday evenings, the week's work behind him. If he had not made it his street, if he had permitted a certain violent emotion to overwhelm him and thereafter mar his relationship with Teresa, he would be walking home now through a dusk sadly toned and patterned. But he had with frozen determination put out of his mind and body the memory of that winter night when Jo Porte had seemed to run through him like quicksilver—he could in retrospect think of a no more adequate simile.

And so this had become his street, a street of noble elms leading from his day's work to his night's rest and his secure, unshadowed love. It was the sort of thing writers liked to sneer at, he thought spaciously, liked to decry with such words as "smug" and "philistine" and "middle class." Well, he could laugh at them all—and pity them. He wished he could tell Teresa this, tonight especially, because it would be in the nature of a compliment to her. But the trouble was that Teresa, still so tempestuously young, might at once distort the whole thing.

Remarkable, he thought now, how a fleeting emotion—however intense—could become so utterly obliterated in the full, rich tide of marriage. A surge of gratitude, ennobling even in its humility, came over him at the thought of Teresa and their life together.

His position in the academy had taken all his time in the winter months, and what he had to spare had been spent for the most part among Teresa's friends, the "younger set" in Carthia. They had driven east for a vacation in July, visited Dorothy who was now awaiting the arrival of her first child, and

after a prolonged ramble through Maine and Quebec had returned barely in time for the opening of the school year. The trip, as Teresa said, had been their "real honeymoon." In more than a year, then, he had seen almost nothing of Jo Porte, although she had been working at Sky Valley.

Of course, he might have been mistaken today when he came out of Parr's restaurant, where he had lunched because it was Josie's day off and Teresa was out at some club affair with her mother. He had only caught a fleeting glimpse of the girl who had rounded the corner, away from him. The clean-cut profile under the rather shabby hat, the country-colored throat and cheek—it was quite possible that some other girl might resemble Jo Porte in these respects. But whoever she was, she had the same sturdy set to her shoulders, the same proud lift to her head, the same resolute walk.

Perhaps it was just as well that he had not yielded to the impulse to follow and overtake her. It was better, all in all, that their paths should not cross too frequently. Not that he feared any recurrence in himself of that dismaying and unaccountable emotion that had swept over him when they had skated out together, away from the crowd at the Vandermeyer party, but that Jo Porte might remember it too well. She wasn't the kind who forgot easily.

He shook his mind free of any further thought of her. It always left him vaguely ashamed and irritated with himself.

One thing, at least, had pleased him immeasurably during the past year. Ashbrooke had become uncannily expert in his dealings on the stock market. The youngster—well, he was twenty-six now—had even opened a small office in Carthia and was really taking his business seriously. He still lived at the farm, where he spent a few hours each day strutting importantly about, but Royce could forgive him a little strutting now and then, since it seemed that finance was to be his peculiar field. He was already talking about his first million, and although he was like his father in his unawareness of the value of money, he was showing himself capable of a concentration that was surprising to say the least, especially when Royce had feared that he would never concentrate on anything.

The lilac hedge, almost leafless now after the drumming rain, appeared suddenly through the yellowish dusk. Royce grinned at himself. He had a habit of falling so hard into thought that once or twice he had actually passed his own gate. Teresa had seen him do it once, watching him from the window, and he had never heard the end of it.

It was possible that she had not come home yet. He had warned her that he would be late because of the faculty meeting—these Friday afternoons had already become the bane of his existence! She might have gone somewhere with her mother after the club luncheon. She always hated to come home to an empty house. They had planned to eat dinner out, as they always did on Josie's day off. But when he looked beyond the hedge he saw a glimmer of light in the den at the side of the house, through the glistening, bare weeping-willows. Tessie was home!

He hurried up the flagstone walk and took the three steps to the porch at one stride. The evening paper was lying at the door. She must have come home early, then, or she would have taken it in. He picked it up and opened the door.

"Hullo, kid!" he called out, and threw his hat and coat down on the settle.

The radio was playing softly in the den. Royce chuckled as he walked down the narrow strip of Axminster carpet on the hall floor and wondered when Tess would get tired of hearing that song. *I can't give you anything but love, Baby!* From the doorway he saw that the log in the fireplace was in embers. He stepped into the den and saw not Teresa but young Bob Ford, one of Mr. Jaffey's accountants in the bank. Bob straightened up from the radio.

"Hello, Royce!" Though rather stocky and unprepossessing, Bob Ford had an engaging smile. "You're getting in late, eh?"

Royce felt foolishly disappointed. He had all but had his arms out for Teresa—and here was this young bore!

"Another damned faculty meeting!" he said shortly. "Where's Tessie?"

"Oh—she just excused herself for a minute." He lifted a high ball glass from an end table and sat down on the davenport. "I just dropped in for a sec on my way home, and Tess poured me a drink. I was hoping you'd come along in time to have one with me."

"Not a bad idea, Bob!" Royce turned on another bridge lamp and dropped into a chair to unfold the evening paper.

"I'll fix you one, old man," Ford said, and got to his feet with an eager bounce.

"Well—thanks." Royce laughed as the young fellow disappeared toward the kitchen. There was very little difference in their ages, but Ford always

acted as if Royce were his senior by at least twenty years. Perhaps teaching school gave one a stodgy look.

He glanced quickly over the front page and saw that President-elect Hoover had started for Latin America on the battleship *Maryland*, ushered out of San Pedro harbor by the twenty-one-gun presidential salute. There was something about an Anti-Ku-Klux Klan Act being put through the New York legislature. The first air mail from Europe to Chile . . .

Teresa entered the den through the door behind Royce.

"I heard you, darling!" she cried, and slid down upon his lap, wrecking the newspaper. She snuggled against him and nipped with her teeth at a button on his vest. It was a trick of hers he loved. "I was just prettying up—especially!"

Royce held her close. "Been home long, darling?"

"Just a few minutes. And I brought those books you wanted from the library. I went and got them after the luncheon. Oh, the luncheon was simply awful, Roycie! I thought I'd die before Mrs. Coombes got through reading her paper."

"What did you expect? How about one little kiss?"

She kissed him, drawing away and keeping him with her, one hand back of his head. Then they both laughed, to make light of what was not light.

Bob Ford came back into the room with Royce's high ball. Teresa got up. "Oh, Bob, you sweet lamb! I'd completely forgotten about you."

He pretended to look hurt, turned to Royce, and said, "That's darned good rye you've got!"

"Some my dad has kept hidden since before prohibition," Royce told him as he took his glass.

"He must have a good place to hide it."

"Obviously," he replied good-naturedly, but underneath he felt a wrathful boiling. He knew Bob Ford was thinking of Ashbrooke. There were a lot of people who were ready to jump on Ashbrooke at the drop of a hat. He was making too much money to suit them, in all probability. If Ford had half Ashbrooke's brains, Royce thought angrily, he wouldn't be grubbing away behind a wicket for thirty dollars a week.

He got up from his chair and stood facing the fire, high ball in hand. "We'd better have another log on the fire," he said, and set his glass on the

mantel.

"I'll do it," Ford said, and bent over the wood basket at once, his face averted.

"There isn't much body to that wood," Royce observed as he watched Ford placing a couple of sticks above the embers. "I'll have to talk to Halstrom about it next time I see him."

Teresa looked intently down at her wrist watch. "I started the fire the minute I came in. The house was awfully damp, dear. Mamma says we ought to pull down the vines because they *do* make a house damp. They start some kind of mold, or mildew, or something. We have enough trees around, anyhow, don't you think?"

Royce went and sat beside her on the davenport. "Anything you say goes around here, darling. Pull down the house if you like." He leaned back and sipped his drink. He put an arm about Teresa and drew her over toward him so that the delicately scented red foam of her hair brushed his cheek.

Bob Ford had the unhoped-for grace to finish his drink suddenly and say, "I've got to shove along, folks. Mother is having a gang in for dinner. See you later. You're both coming over for bridge tonight, of course?"

"About eight," Teresa said, smoothing the silk over her knee. "We promised your mother—"

"*We* did?" Royce turned and looked at her in surprise. "We promised to drive out to the farm late tonight with Ash and visit Dad."

"Why, Roycie! I'd clean forgotten. And I told Mrs. Ford yesterday afternoon we'd be over."

"Come over for an hour or so, anyhow," Ford suggested.

"I simply *have* to go," Teresa said, her eyes dark and narrow in the firelight.

"Well, that's all right, darling. I'll run you around after dinner and you can have a couple of rubbers while I do a little work. As a matter of fact—no offense to your mother, Bob—but I'm getting a bit fed up on the night life. I've got to get down to business. Your mother will understand if I don't come. She was a teacher herself once."

"Sure—don't worry, old man. I was going to be the odd man, anyhow."

"Tell your mother I'll wear my new bouffant taffeta just for spite," Teresa said pertly. "If Royce doesn't want to go out with me, I'm going to

vamp someone else."

Royce laughed and put his arm about her. "Trying to scare me into it, eh?"

Bob Ford grinned. "Well, toot-toot, folks! I've got to beat it. Thanks for the drink. And I hope you change your mind, Royce."

2

They had come back from dinner in the little tea room Teresa liked, Royce had got into robe and slippers and had sat down to his desk. Teresa presently came out of the bedroom wearing her pale yellow taffeta gown that made her look like a pirouetting doll. Her black velvet cloak was over her arm and her hair was a brilliant aureole about her head.

He looked up to admire her, especially her pretty knees twinkling out from beneath the wide spread of her skirt, and offered once more to drive her the six blocks to the Fords'.

"I'm quite capable of driving myself, thank you," she said loftily.

"All right, kid. I'll stroll over with Ash when he comes and fetch you back to change your clothes. He won't be along much before ten."

She went into the hall without replying. She did not slam the door behind her as she went out. She closed it very gently, acidly.

Royce smiled and turned to his desk.

It was scarcely a secret that he had been working for the past year on what he hoped one day might be a novel, but he had spoken to no one about it except Teresa, of course, and Ashbrooke. To Teresa the thought of having a novelist-husband was immediately thrilling. She saw herself already in New York and London and Paris, living the gay life of the cafés and the studios, choosing her friends from among the artists and writers of the great cities of the world. Royce had tried to tell her that there was much more to it than that—more of drudgery and disappointment and less of gaiety and excitement than she imagined. He reminded her, too, that he was still a long way from recognition in the field of letters. The first step, necessarily, was the completion of a full-length manuscript.

At present, even that modest achievement seemed hopelessly remote. Of course, all his writing had been done in spare hours, after midnight for the most part, when he had come home from parties with Teresa or when guests had gone, or during the week-ends whenever he had been able to get away by himself. He might have done something on it during the summer, but that would have meant depriving Teresa of the motor trip to Maine and Quebec. It was all very well, he thought with sudden disgust at himself, to justify his failure by blaming it on external conditions, but the failure was there nonetheless, staring him in the face. The months had slipped by and now when he looked over what he had done he felt like throwing it in the fire. There was no spontaneity in it, no life. It lay before him like a row of pulled vegetables drying in the sun.

The door bell clanged and he pushed the pile of manuscript aside. That would be Ashbrooke now. He got up and stood where he could see down the hall.

"Come in!"

Ashbrooke threw the door open. "Hello, professor! Buy me a drink, will you? This is a hell of a night!"

"Come on in to the fire. I wasn't expecting you quite so soon."

"Got through early." He set his hat and coat aside and strode into the den. "All alone?"

"Tess went over to the Fords' for a rubber of bridge. I begged off. We'll pick her up later."

Ashbrooke stretched his arms above his head. "Well—that's the way it goes. Six months ago she couldn't move without you trailing along. Now you sit home on a rainy night and toast your shins while she does the social stuff. You're getting old, boy!"

"I'm getting fed up with running around if that's what you mean."

"Oh! So the love birds have had a tiff, what?"

Royce grinned. "Nothing serious. Sit down and I'll get your drink."

When he came back from the kitchen he found Ashbrooke standing before the desk, a half dozen pages of the manuscript in his hand.

"How's the great American novel coming on?"

Royce set the glass down on the side table. "Rotten, thanks!"

Ashbrooke sat down, facing the fire, and sipped his drink. “You’re making a damn fool of yourself, Royce,” he said finally.

“Probably. A man has to find that out for himself, however.”

“Sure—he finds it out when it’s too late to do anything about it. One thing you do know without waiting to find out—you knew before you started that there’d never be a decent living in teaching.”

“There’s no money in it, of course. Besides, I’m not sure how long I’ll stick it out. It wouldn’t be so bad—”

“You’ll stick it out, don’t worry, unless something happens and you get yourself canned. Even if you go into university work—what’s in it? Look here—I’m making money hand over fist these days. It’s easy. Three of my pet stocks jumped a total of over twelve points today. I made more money in two hours this morning than you’ll make all year. It doesn’t make sense. You could be doing the same.”

“As a matter of fact, Ash, I don’t think I could. I’m glad you’re getting on, but—well, I’m built on different lines, I guess. I value my own peace of mind too much to—”

“Hell! You’re talking like an old woman, Royce. Make your pile first and practice your ideals later. In three years the world will be so far ahead of you you’ll never catch up with the crowd.”

The door bell rang and Ashbrooke started from his chair with an imprecation.

Royce went to the door. Dr. John Murdoch stood there under a greenish black umbrella.

“Hello, Doc!” Royce greeted him heartily. “It’s good to see you. Come on in!”

Murdoch snapped down his umbrella and stamped into the hall. “I’m not busting in on anything, am I?”

“Not at all! Tessie’s out for the evening and Ash and I are having a chin together.”

Murdoch dropped his umbrella on the floor, ignoring the stand in the corner. “Saw your light going. Been up to the hospital on a confinement. Wish they’d pick decent weather for these so-called blessed events. No consideration for a man. Tough job, too. Breech delivery. Feel like a nip o’ something before I turn in. Got anything handy?”

“I sure have!” Royce drew him into the den.

Ashbrooke waved a hand. “Howdy, Doc!”

“Hello, young fellow! Every time I see you lately you’re guzzling licker. Ease off!”

Ashbrooke laughed. “Didn’t I hear you asking for something just now?”

“I’m an old man,” Murdoch growled, and seated himself on the least comfortable chair he could find. Since it was the chair he had always chosen on his visits, Royce did not suggest a softer one.

“Still bringing brats into the world, eh?” Ashbrooke said.

“You thought I’d stop when I brought you in, I s’pose. I wish I had. I’m getting tired of it—especially watching them grow up and amount to nothing after all the trouble. The human race is on the down grade—getting worse every generation. Take this kid tonight. What chance has it got? Mother only seventeen—married last year. You ought to know her. Married young Fred Toufang, Brade’s son. Lives on Brade’s farm in a shack.”

“There’s a raft of those Toufangs,” Royce said.

Ashbrooke shook his head. “I don’t know how the deuce they all make a living.”

Murdoch’s brows drew darkly together. “They live a damn sight better than we do because they don’t ask for so much.”

In a few minutes he was taking his rye neat, as was his custom. He tilted his upright chair back an inch or two from the floor, one hand against the wall to steady himself as he rocked back and forward. It was one of the old man’s habits that Royce could never get used to. Much as he loathed rocking-chairs, he resolved to install one some day especially for John Murdoch.

For a while the talk was desultory—national politics, Coolidge prosperity and the new administration under Herbert Hoover, the sinking of the *Vestris*, the spectacular activity on Wall Street.

Murdoch pulled at his graying red mustache with one hand and balanced his chair with the other. His sharp eyes were on Ashbrooke.

“I s’pose you’re well on the way to becoming a millionaire, eh?”

“It’ll take a little time,” Ashbrooke admitted with a grin, “but I’m headed in the right direction.”

"I was out to see your dad the other night," Murdoch went on. "He's very proud—actually proud, mind you!—of what you're doing. Very curious."

"What's so curious about it, Doc?" Royce asked.

Murdoch looked at him for a moment, brows bristling as if with separate, angry life. "I brought you two kids into the world. Remember that. I don't mean I did you a favor, understand. But I could have strangled you at birth, easy as not if I'd had a mind to, and no one would have been any wiser. I saw you both through measles and whooping cough, too. What for?"

"I suppose professional duty had something to do with it," Royce suggested. "After all, a good doctor doesn't go around strangling infants."

"Besides, there's a professional fee connected with that sort of thing, isn't there?" Ashbrooke twitted the old man.

But Murdoch refused to be shaken from his mood. "I've never seen either of you do an honest day's work since you were born."

"That's going it rather strong, Doc," Royce objected.

"You think so. I'll go it one stronger. I have nothing to say against any man being a teacher. And I haven't any kick against a man going out and making a million dollars if he can—and if that's what he wants. The world is full of men who don't know any better. But do you fellows think you were put here for that—one of you to read *The Lady of the Lake* to a bunch of young idiots who don't give a damn for poetry and never will—and the other to sit on his rear end all day and count paper profits that don't exist? That's your idea of a man's job, is it?"

"That breech delivery must have put you screwy, Doc." Ashbrooke tossed his cigarette toward the fireplace as he spoke, but it hit the screen and fell back on the rug. Royce stooped and threw it into the fire, then stood with one elbow on the mantel and gazed intently down at the flickering blaze.

Murdoch's laugh was not pleasant. "Sure—I'm crazy! Crazy as a loon! Well, young fellow, I'll tell you just about how crazy I am. In my short span of life I've seen three generations of Hilyards. I'm not sorry I'm near the end. In three more generations there won't be a Hilyard left. If there is I wouldn't recognize him—and wouldn't want to." Royce and Ashbrooke were both silent and Murdoch, after a heavy pause, went on. "There are only three things any man has a right to be proud of. He can be proud of the God he worships—if he has one. He can be proud of the stock he springs from—

if he's any better than a rat. And he can be proud of the earth that feeds him—if he knows how to be grateful for anything. Add that up, you fellows, and see where you stand."

"Oh, for God's sake, John!" Royce scoffed. He had always enjoyed listening to Murdoch's cynical and humorously pessimistic outbursts, but this was hitting too close to home.

Murdoch brought his chair down to the floor suddenly. "Take it or leave it! Old Ashbrooke Hilyard had his feet on the ground. This country wouldn't be worth a damn today if it hadn't been built by men like him. Call them barons and feudal lords and anything else you like. It doesn't make any difference. Now, they're all dead—or most of them. And their grandsons are drinking sweet cocktails and lying in bed till noon. And we wonder what's wrong with the world. Bah!" He lifted his brows suddenly and smiled. "Give me another nip and I'll go home."

When Royce had filled his small glass the old man tossed it off, bade a gruff good night and stalked into the hall. Royce followed him to the door and helped him into his coat. A moment later he stood in the doorway looking after the hunched figure as it loomed for a moment against the ocher nimbus of a street lamp. He couldn't help thinking that Dr. John Murdoch had aged singularly in the past year.

"Old John was in rare form tonight," he said as he came back into the den.

Ashbrooke drew himself up crossly. "He's getting balmier every day."

Royce looked at his watch. "Give Tess a ring at the Fords'. We might as well get along. I can't do any work here tonight."

Ashbrooke took the telephone from the table beside him and gave the number. When he had asked for Teresa he waited and presently drawled, "Hello, beautiful! We're coming right over for you. Leaving in five minutes. . . ."

Royce carried the rye bottle into the kitchen.

3

It was after eleven when they arrived at the farm. Mrs. Hilyard had already gone to bed. Jo Porte had driven across to spend the evening with

her mother and father and had not yet returned. Len Hilyard sat alone before the cheerful log fire in the living room.

"I think I'll go up and talk to Mother Hilyard," Teresa said at once, and disappeared.

It wasn't long before Ashbrooke wearied of talk about the farm. His father was in one of his dark moods, anyhow. It was nothing new to Ashbrooke. The master of Sky Valley had been going about too much among the farmers of the district lately. He was too impressionable. He had picked up his neighbors' pessimism and was becoming more and more difficult every week. Ashbrooke yawned and stretched, bade a lazy good night, and went off to his room. Royce and his father sat staring into the fire.

"It's all right to bury your head in the sand," said Leonard. "Ash is making money these days and he won't listen to anyone who isn't. I suppose I get on his nerves sometimes. Mother's, too. But things aren't going well with the farmers. The good years are gone. We're beginning to feel it. Charlie Vandermeyer sold his crop last week. He tells me he'll have to get rid of half his stock this winter—and Lord knows he hasn't got much to start with. He'll get next to nothing when he sells, and he'll have to pinch every penny to get through the winter. The others are in worse shape than Charlie."

"How is Ernest Porte fixed?"

"Erne seems easy-going, but he's a bit more cagey than the rest of them. He didn't splurge when prices were good. Didn't even buy himself a car. He'll manage. But the rents from the other farms—"

"Well, we'll probably be able to carry them over," Royce put in. "They've been carried before when times were bad. After all, Dad, you have the family pretty well off your hands."

Len Hilyard was silent for a moment. "Your mother wants to go and stay with Dorothy—till the baby comes. Clifford has offered to send a check to cover the trip. I don't know—if we can't hold up our end of it—"

"Ash ought to be able to help out a little," Royce suggested. "I'd be glad to do—"

"That's not the point, my boy. I've been in the habit of doing these things myself."

"I think you're overdoing it, Dad. It's all right to be proud, but there's a limit to everything."

“Pride is all a man has when he has nothing else.”

Royce laughed. “Obviously. But we haven’t taken the count yet, by a long way.” There was something in his father’s mood that made talking difficult. “These things adjust themselves if we give them time. We may have to cut down a bit here and there, but it may be good for us in the long run. How much are you paying Jo Porte, by the way?”

“Oh, that’s nothing—it comes to about twenty-five a month, and she certainly earns it. Keeps tabs on everything—”

As he spoke the front door opened and a moment later Jo came into the room. She was clad in dark blue, her face almost hidden beneath a cloche hat.

“Come up to the fire, Jo,” Len Hilyard invited.

Royce offered his hand as she came close to him, and an aroma of rainy autumn woods seemed to touch him as he pressed her cool fingers in his.

“You have a houseful tonight, Jo,” he said, smiling.

“So I see.” Her voice was pleasant, bright, impersonal. “You’re staying overnight, aren’t you?”

“If you’ll have us.” Royce caught himself using a tone that was a little too benign—a little, well, genially condescending. He had not meant to and felt vexed.

“How did you find your mother?” Len asked.

“A bit tired, that’s all. She spent the day putting up squash. She’s going into town with Dad tomorrow.”

“Good!” Len got up slowly from his chair. “Well, I think I’ll get off to bed. Six o’clock comes early these days.”

He went abruptly. Jo removed her hat and shook her hair out. In the light from the fire it was the color of dark wild honey, Royce thought.

“Dad’s working pretty hard for a man of his age,” he said, frowning.

“He works hard,” Jo agreed, “but he’s worrying a great deal besides.”

Royce looked at her quickly. “You’ve noticed that?”

“I could hardly help noticing it.”

“I’ve been afraid of it—just lately. Has he talked to you about it?”

“Not right *to* me. I think—perhaps he can’t talk much about it.”

“He’s naturally concerned over the low prices this season,” Royce said.

Jo sat looking into the fire for a moment. “That may have something to do with it, of course.”

“You think there’s something else?”

“A bad year is nothing new to a farmer,” Jo replied, her eyes moving gravely to Royce’s, “even to a farmer like Mr. Hilyard. We get into the habit of taking the bad with the good. Your father isn’t thinking of this year—nor of the next, particularly.”

She paused. Royce, looking at her, was suddenly aware that a change had come over her since she had taken her place in the Hilyard household. The faded red flannel of the waist she wore under her jacket was pulled tight across her full young breasts. Her throat, her face, had a riper look, her eyes a more level, thoughtful quiet.

He waited for her to go on.

“Something was built here—and the man who built it is dead,” she said at last, hesitantly. “Maybe that doesn’t mean anything to you.”

Royce was startled. He remembered what Doctor John had said earlier in the evening. There had been direct accusation in the old man’s tirade. He had thought of little else since. Was Jo accusing him now?

“When a thing is built we don’t expect it to last forever,” he said impatiently. “The world is moving forward. We can’t hang on to the past forever. We give too much thought to it. I sometimes wonder if these old men—like Grandfather Hilyard—ever really die. They stay around to plague us unless we get rid of them in our own way.”

“In our own way?”

He was thoughtful for a moment. “I’ve even considered writing a book about old Ashbrooke Hilyard some day.”

He didn’t tell her that he had been muddling along at it for a whole year and was no further ahead now than he had been at the beginning.

“I don’t see—you mean a story?”

“Perhaps. It’s just an idea. If I put him in a book I might get him out of my system—and forget him. I think I’d feel better if I did.”

“Is that what makes people write books?” Jo asked.

Royce laughed. “Lord, how should I know? Let’s talk about something else. I feel as if we had called a ghost into the room.”

Jo asked him then about Laura and Alec Keefe, whom she had not seen for a while. She had hoped to drop in on Laura at the library today, she said, when she was in town marketing, but she had not found time. That must have been Jo he had seen disappearing around the corner, then, Royce thought. But she continued talking so warmly about the Keefes, and the reading she had done with them, that the moment passed in which he might have mentioned, casually, the glimpse he had had of her today.

Royce spoke of the new fall books and recommended one or two he had read, promising to send them out to her with Ashbrooke. Their conversation flowed along with a smooth freedom that surprised and delighted Royce.

And meanwhile Jo was thinking that it was easy enough to talk when your heart was quiet, when your mind was busy with things that really did not matter. It was only after you had been led unwittingly into that secret abode where the dark stirrings of your own being were too deep for words—it was then that speech forsook you. She could not remember when she had first discovered the truth of that. Was it one spring, years ago, when she had come upon a turtle furtively dropping her eggs into the little pit she had dug beside the slough? Or was it even longer ago—when she had first seen wild geese rise from reeds near the shore and stretch their long necks southward as they formed their line of flight against the sky? How could one ever know? There was so much of one’s very self in it, woven and over-woven, with the past, the present, and something outside time altogether.

They had given no thought to the hour when Teresa’s voice called petulantly from above.

“Royce, dear, are you going to sit up all night? I’ve been in bed for ages.”

Royce sprang to his feet and looked at his watch.

“Lord, I had no idea. . . . I’ll be right up, Tess!”

He bade Jo a hurried good night. A moment later she set the screen close to the fireplace, although there was nothing left there but a few glowing embers. Then she turned out the lights and went silently to bed in the room that had once been Milledge’s.

Chapter Three

1

The seasons filled, white and green, then flowed away, and once more autumn came to Sky Valley Farm.

Royce had watched the months go by with a feeling that the world was rushing past him in some sort of mad race that left him breathless and bewildered. Day after day Ashbrooke brought him news of the astounding happenings in the nation's markets, the fabulous fortunes being heaped up overnight by men who had mortgaged their souls to buy shares in industries that were nothing more to them than names in a meaningless list of names. Each morning Royce entered his classroom with the sense of one seeking shelter from a whirlwind. Each evening he emerged again to face the storm, aware of his own hopeless inadequacy in a civilization that jeered at control, a civilization in which he was an alien and a misfit.

Even at home with Teresa he was unable to escape the feeling that something was wrong with him. Why could he not go out and do what others were doing? Teresa's friends were all making money, talking money, living money. They were growing rich while he lumbered along, disgruntled and out of sorts, disgusted with his own futility. It was not that his position in the academy stood in the way. Neal Whitman, the agreeable, handsome young fellow who had come to the school the year after Royce had joined the staff, was already talking of "taking his profits" and going into business somewhere with his brother. "A man's a fool to stay in the teaching profession these days—just a plain damned fool!" Neal had said that one evening at dinner, and Teresa had agreed with him. She had agreed so lightly, so innocently, that Royce had winced. Well, maybe Neal was right. Maybe Teresa was right. Maybe he lacked something essential to this thing called success. But when a man had no flair for finance . . . They had laughed at that. Neal had no flair for finance, knew nothing about it. But he'd take a chance—any time—when the prize was attractive enough to justify it.

Royce might have retorted that Neal was free to take chances of that sort—he was unmarried, he had responsibilities toward no one but himself. But he had thought better of it. For if he had made that remark, Teresa, after Neal's departure, would have charged him with hinting at their old argument—that they should begin soon to think of a family. And it was Teresa's conviction that there should be no children until Royce's income was at least double what it was at present. They must be able to afford a nurse, a larger house. . . .

She had not meant it as a taunt; he knew that. It was merely that she had been brought up in a certain way—as his own sister Dorothy had been, for that matter—and it was beyond the limits of her imagination to think of any other.

He had made what he believed to be a supreme effort this past summer to justify Tessie's faith in him, to vindicate those rapturous expectations of hers. While she was away on a trip to Alaska with her mother—a trip for which, to Royce's private chagrin, Mr. Jaffey paid almost entirely—he had toiled faithfully at the novel that had been lying idle all winter. And what had come of that? With the manuscript almost completed, he had shown it to Laura Keefe, and she had been *kindly* in her estimate of it. And then, when he had belligerently demanded what was wrong with it, she had frankly said, "Everything, Royce. It simply isn't true. It isn't your grandfather, and it isn't you. It's—it's your desire to make some extra money." Later, he believed with cold intuitiveness that she had almost added, "For Teresa."

Well, that had been that. He had read the thing over again just before Teresa's return, and his own posturing in it had made him sick. He had buried it in a drawer he never used, deep down under stiffly intellectual attempts at short stories which had been returned to him with nasty fidelity from "the better" magazines.

So much for himself, he thought now in early October, now when he was twenty-nine years old.

But his father, Len. What, exactly, was going on there? He had a vague, almost scholarly notion—as he regarded it himself derisively—that Ashbrooke had got rather deeply into Len's resources. If there was any basis for his notion it was a strange thing, for Leonard Hilyard had always maintained a curious aloofness from the money marts. It was one part of his nature that Royce himself had most conspicuously inherited.

And yet—In July half of Sky Valley's herd of pure bred Herefords had been sold with such suddenness that Carthia talked about it. Royce had

wondered, and he might have gone and spoken directly to his father about it, but Ashbrooke, in town, had discouraged him. “Let Dad run his business his own way. If he wants our advice he’ll ask for it.” Len had not asked for it—he had appeared quite serene when Royce had seen him again.

But after that there had been his talk with Wilbur Jaffey, his father-in-law. He had dropped into the bank on some business of his own and had exchanged greetings with the smoothly rotund, amiable personage who had once run for mayor of Carthia and who was, despite the relationship, still in all important respects a stranger to Royce. He had lingered to ask whether any news had come from Mrs. Jaffey. They showed each other picture post cards sent from Victoria and Prince Rupert. When they had talked of the day’s activities on the stock market, Royce finally wanted to know whether his father’s position was still secure. Wilbur Jaffey had waved a smooth hand and had settled back in his chair with an affable grin. “If everyone in the country was as secure as your dad, young fellow, we bankers wouldn’t have so many gray hairs. We’d live to be a hundred and die happy. Why not drop in some evening and take dinner with me somewhere? This bachelor’s life may be all right for some, but it’s not so good for a married man, eh? Make it soon, Royce. By the way, you might tell your dad I’d like to see him when he comes to town next. He hasn’t been around for over a week.”

With no particular reason for his feeling, Royce had gone out of the bank wishing he had not spoken to Wilbur Jaffey at all.

His fears—well, they weren’t exactly fears, but rather recurring spells of uneasiness—rose from incidents which might have no significance whatever.

When his mother had returned from Chicago, bringing Dorothy and her infant son with her for the summer, Royce had spent a week at Sky Valley, and the family was one again. But it could not be quite the same, of course. Telegrams and telephone calls came at all hours from Clifford Noble in Chicago, and there were Teresa’s messages, too, sent from every port of call between Seattle and Seward. Ashbrooke was importantly absorbed in business affairs and seemed to Royce to be existing on another planet. But they were all actually together at Sky Valley, and Len Hilyard was happier than Royce had seen him in years.

There was always an undertone to his happiness, however, as if he had some premonition that they might never be together again. He had said as much once or twice. But Royce had ridiculed that. Wasn’t it always so with any family that came together in the old home after a separation? Yet on

days when his father went about, silent and preoccupied, shut in with his own thoughts, Royce had been filled with misgivings.

It was on such a day that two men drove into the farmyard and came to where Royce and his father were watching Seth Hornblow clean and dress a wound in the black mare's left front hock. Ashbrooke had been riding the day before and had brought her in limping.

"Good morning, Mr. Hilyard."

Though he must have been aware of their arrival, he had paid them no heed until one of them spoke. He answered then without looking up.

"Good morning. Is there anything I can do for you?"

The speaker gave his name and that of his companion. Royce had never heard of them before.

"We understand that you are thinking of putting some of your standing timber on the market in the near future."

Len Hilyard turned sharply and looked at them for the first time. "Who are you?"

The man mentioned the name of a well-known lumber company that had a branch office in town.

"And who told you I wanted to sell my timber?"

"Well, naturally we regarded the information as reliable, Mr. Hilyard, or we wouldn't have wasted our time coming out here to see you personally. We thought—"

"No matter what you think," Len interrupted testily, "you're wasting my time as well as your own. I'm busy."

The two men turned away without another word and went back to their car. Royce watched them drive down the roadway under the tall elms.

"I wonder where they got that idea?" he asked when the car had disappeared.

"Damned gossip!" his father retorted. "People must talk about something."

"You're not thinking of selling the timber?"

"Not while I live—and I hope not while the memory of your grandfather lives, either."

Royce was persuaded then that things were not so bad as, for one horrible moment, he had feared.

They had had good days together, too. Particularly the days when they had driven out among the neighbors, looking over their fields, inspecting their stock, discussing their hopes for a better market in the fall. Perhaps—Royce's thoughts went back to the manuscript lying in his desk at home—perhaps there was something after all to his idea that old men like his grandfather continued to live after they had been laid away in the churchyard. Certainly his father was taking much the same interest in his neighbors now as the elder Hilyard had done before he grew too old to move about.

"You'd have made a good politician, Dad," he ventured one day as they drove off the Toufang farm where his father had fondled a half dozen of Brade's grandchildren and even kissed their grimy little faces.

"A very bad one, I'm afraid," Len Hilyard responded dryly. "I'd make a poor hand at asking any man to vote for me."

"You find it easy enough to kiss their babies," Royce laughed.

"I wouldn't if it meant soliciting votes. The fact is, I like these people—even their sticky kids. I'm a little late in finding it out, perhaps, but—"

His voice trailed away, the gesture of his sinewy brown hand more eloquent than words. It was clear enough what was happening to Len Hilyard, Royce thought. Somewhere down along the years he had made a choice, not knowing what he did. That choice had been Alda Tate. Thereafter, his heart, his love, his very life, had been for the woman he married and the children she had given him. Together, the wife and children had conspired against the man who was the son of Ashbrooke Hilyard, not knowing what *they* did. Now that his family had gone their several ways—and Royce suspected that his mother would be delighted to remain permanently with Dorothy in Chicago—Len was unconsciously seeking an emotional satisfaction from these people who gleaned a living from the land—land that had once been solidly his. And visualizing his father going about among them, before long, seeking respite from his loneliness, Royce could scarcely keep the tears from his eyes.

It had come as no surprise to him then when in late August, just before Teresa's return, his father let it be known that the Hilyard house would be thrown open for an old-fashioned Thanksgiving to which everyone in the

district would be invited. He announced his intention one evening at the dinner table when Royce was present.

Dorothy laughed at first, thinking her father was joking. Mrs. Hilyard gazed fixedly at her husband, wondering, no doubt, if he had taken leave of his senses. But Royce knew his father was in earnest. The scene that followed was only what he might have expected. Mrs. Hilyard demanded first of all why he didn't make plans for Christmas while he was about it. Who ever *heard* of inviting the countryside to Thanksgiving dinner before the first of September? Everybody would laugh at him! No, Len replied calmly, they wouldn't. It was country ways to plan long ahead of time for a holiday, and they were all country people, including the Hilyards. Alda Hilyard leaned away from her rich dessert—of which there was a small spoonful left, although she had protested that she could eat none—and stared intently at her husband.

"Then you really *mean* it?" she asked incredulously.

"I'm not in the habit of talking at random."

Mrs. Hilyard rose from the table in trembling dignity, and assured them all that she could very easily find pleasanter entertainment than seeing her home torn to pieces by a mob of brush farmers—and would certainly not be a witness to any such debacle. Dorothy tearfully declared that it was no concern of hers, since she would be spending the day with her husband and his friends in Chicago, but it was simply dreadful that Mamma had to be so upset when she was not feeling any too well anyhow, and if Dorothy could have *her* way she would take Mamma straight back to Chicago with her. . . .

Royce, after a glance at Ashbrooke, whose face was a study in blank amusement, had looked patiently at the ceiling. But now, when he lowered his eyes, they met Jo Porte's dark, scornful gaze. In a crisp white apron, her rich, glowing hair tied back with a small white ribbon, she was removing the dessert plates from the table. The corners of her mouth barely flickered, but Royce felt the blood rush suddenly into his face. It had been *her* people his mother and sister had talked about as if they were savages!

Rather astonishingly, then, it came to him that he had been so absorbed in his book—bad as Laura Keefe said it was!—that except for pleasant greetings he had scarcely exchanged a word with Jo Porte since that rainy night last year when they had had such a good talk in front of the fireplace. During the week of intense heat that he had spent at Sky Valley, she had been at home caring for her mother, who had become ill again then, and after that Royce had been at the farm only overnight or for week-ends. The

discovery that he had been so little aware of Jo brought him first a kind of relief, of self-congratulation, but immediately he felt that that attitude was unwarrantedly smug. She was intelligent, interesting, vivid; now that his first reprehensible impulse toward her was buried deep in the past, why should he not regard her as a friend with whom he could exchange ideas on things—as valuable a friend as Laura Keefe or Alec?

These reflections had occupied less than half a minute. He stood, his father stood, while Ashbrooke with a non-committal look gave his mother his arm to lead her, rigid with outrage, from the table. Meanwhile, too, Jo Porte had moved quietly around picking up the plates, enclosed again in that menial task to which, Royce saw as he had seen before, she gave an aloof and graceful dignity.

There was no decent way under the sun, he decided quickly, by which he could offer Jo Porte an apology on his mother's behalf. She was as well aware as he, by this time, of Mrs. Hilyard's stupid snobbery. In any case, he could not talk to Jo tonight.

After a cigar and a brandy with his father, who appeared singularly undisturbed by Alda's temper, Royce went home. As he drove through the plushy August darkness that smelled of rain, he felt himself surrounded by much purposeless nonsense. But his spirit rose sturdily at the thought that in less than a week Teresa would be home. She had been gone entirely too long!

2

Dorothy had left early in September, soon after Teresa and her mother came home from their vacation. Mrs. Hilyard had a month in bed, during which Jo Porte carried her meals to her room and read to her when she was in the mood to listen. Ashbrooke spent most of his time in town, where he had taken a small apartment which he had furnished in rather bizarre style. Royce went back to his work in the academy, and autumn came with a turbulence of scarlet and gilt and brave burgundy against the solid dark of evergreens as far as sight could reach.

About Fallen Star Lake people were looking forward with abashed awe, simple gratitude, or candid curiosity to Thanksgiving dinner at the Hilyards' in November.

But before the end of October something happened that made the prospect of spending Thanksgiving at Sky Valley a matter of reduced moment, even to the farmers about Fallen Star. A black frost had visited the mushroom fortunes of the nation in the night.

There had been warnings of the imminent crisis during the later weeks of the summer. Young Bob Ford had decided he might have to wait awhile before he bought his new car. Neal Whitman had begun to speak less disparagingly of his position on the academy staff. Ashbrooke had been somewhat less jaunty in his references to his "first million." And Wilbur Jaffey had talked a great deal about "credit structure" and "periods of readjustment" and "sound technical positions"—phrases that came very reassuringly from the lips of a banker.

But warnings were of little avail. Talk failed of its purpose on that day when Dr. John Murdoch drew his car to the curb and called to Royce, who was walking home from the school.

"Humpty-dumpty has fallen off the wall!" the old man announced, and opened his newspaper to show him the headlines.

Royce glanced at the paper, then hurried home and called Ashbrooke at his office. Yes, everything in the headlines was true—but the newspapers didn't know half the truth. Nobody did. The latest reports by telegraph were hours behind the actual happenings. No, Ashbrooke hadn't telephoned his father. Hadn't had a minute to spare since early morning—and he'd be busy till all hours. But Len must have heard something by now. Maybe Royce had better take a run out and talk to him—better not make too much of it for the time being. After all, there was no telling what changes might come in another twenty-four hours. And any change would be for the better.

Royce turned from the telephone with a tightening at his heart. Something in Ashbrooke's words—or rather in the tone of his voice—had hinted at calamity. Even as he decided he must drive out to Sky Valley with the news, he loathed the thought of going. He was glad Teresa had not yet come home from that cocktail party. He would leave a note for her at the house and telephone her from the farm. It would be hard enough to tell Len what had happened, without having Teresa on hand to make the task more unbearable. He would have to find a way to talk to his father, too, while his mother was out of hearing.

He drove away from Carthia with a sense of strangeness that he found as hard to define as it was impossible to dissipate. Every turn in the road, that was as familiar to him as rising in the morning, seemed now capriciously

changed, its features distorted out of recognition. It occurred to him morbidly that the reason for this phenomenon was that he was carrying over the road tidings that were still unguessable in their ultimate effect. Presently his imagination became a network of images of thousands, millions, of roads in the United States, in Europe, on the entire globe, that were undergoing this sinister change at this very moment because of a certain item of news that was being borne over them. The place toward which he was hurrying, even, assumed in his mind attitudes at variance with his knowledge of it, disquietingly, as a place will when revisited after many years.

With an effort Royce shook himself out of the mood.

As he drove beneath the burnished canopy of the elms he heard the shrill, mocking laughter of a loon out toward the islands. Immediately afterwards he saw Jo Porte strolling down the path under the gold trinket leaves of the white birches toward the shore. Her head was bare, her hair shining, darkening, as she moved through the splashes of light and shadow; she wore a short-sleeved housedress, and her arms were stretched up over her head, her wrists bent outward so that as she passed beneath the trees the birch leaves drifted like gold flakes across her palms. She looked as if she were about to rise on wings. And yet, Royce thought, she was the only natural-looking thing he had seen since the world had gone mad.

His father came up to him as he got out of the car.

"You've come out to talk about the market crash, I suppose?" he asked without preamble. "We heard a little—on the radio. Fortunately, your mother wasn't listening. I tried to get Ash on the phone, but couldn't. Has he told you anything?"

"A little," Royce said. "And it's not good, I'm afraid."

"Well—let's have it, boy."

Royce told as much as he knew, adding what little hope he could when he came to an end. "The worst is probably over. There was a conference of bankers this afternoon in New York—"

"Too late for that now. Did Ash say anything about his own losses?"

"He hadn't time to say much of anything."

"If he'd had anything good to say he would have said it. Come in and have supper. You haven't eaten?"

"No."

"I'll go back to town with you afterwards. I must talk to Ashbrooke."

They set off toward the house.

"If Ash needs a little help," Royce suggested, "we might go to Wilbur Jaffey. I wouldn't mind asking him for—"

"You don't understand. I've been to Jaffey already—too often. I borrowed five hundred dollars from him the last time I was in—to see me through until the crop was sold. What do you suppose the crop will bring now? Wilbur Jaffey will own a good part of Sky Valley in another month if I don't lift the note."

"I didn't know it was as bad as that." Royce did his best to keep his voice at its usual pitch.

"We'll get through, I suppose. But you'd better say nothing to your mother about it," Len cautioned as they came to the door. "No need of upsetting her tonight."

Later, on their way to town, Royce thought of Thanksgiving. Reluctantly, he asked his father if he intended to go through with his plans for that festive day, now that there would perhaps be little to be thankful for.

"Why not?" Len demanded with some asperity. "I've invited the neighbors, haven't I? Besides, old Mrs. Vandermeyer was over to see me yesterday. It isn't going to be *my* party, after all. She had the women lined up to take care of the baking and most of the work. High-handed, the old girl was! She'd have it her way or not at all. They're going to pitch in, the whole crowd of 'em, and make it *their* day." Then he added dryly, "You'd almost think the old lady had read it in her teacup—that this was going to happen!"

"They'll be making it an annual affair if you're not careful," Royce warned him.

But Len Hilyard, making no reply to that, was thinking perhaps that there might not be many more autumns at Sky Valley Farm.

3

And it was with this feeling, some weeks later, that Royce set himself to prepare for the holiday. Len Hilyard had asked for an old-fashioned Thanksgiving and he was going to get one. If it was possible at all to make

him forget for a few hours the ruinous month that had just gone by, Royce was determined to achieve that purpose.

With Seth Hornblow helping him he cleared a space in the barn loft, swept the boards clean, and set planks along the walls for seats. He drove around the lake and warned a couple of the younger Toufangs and the three Vandermeyer boys that there would be no turkey for them if they turned up without their mouth organs and their fiddles. Jo Porte helped hang streamers of colored paper from the beams and walls and fill the corners with yellow cornstalks and the largest pumpkins they could find. They worked late into the night, and even Ashbrooke, when he came home haggard-faced from town, admitted the place looked "right purty" and swung Seth Hornblow out upon the floor in a rollicking dance.

Next morning the Hilyard kitchen was a tumult of changing, delicious smells, the savory hiss of roasting turkey filling the bustling room with the certain aroma of holiday.

Royce looked in at the door. Hedvig was busy scouring pans at the sink. Brade Toufang's wife was piling dishes in a cleared space on the kitchen table. Jo Porte knelt before the oven and basted a glistening pyramid of turkey. Her face shone from the heat of the stove and one lock of hair clung to her moist brow. Her sleeves were rolled up above her elbows and her sturdy young arms were still brown from the summer's sun. Without speaking Royce went back to the living room.

Len Hilyard had thrown a couple of logs on the fire and stood watching the sparks trooping up the chimney. Royce thought of how he had seen him an hour ago from an upstairs window of the house, a lonely, erect figure walking across the brown stubble of the south field and thence north and upward to the harsh, stone-pitted crest of the wasteland where he stood for a long moment austerely limned against a wintry sky. What had he been thinking as he stood there? Even now Royce was wrung with pity at the memory of that unforgettable image of him. He had returned to the house, bathed and dressed, and had come downstairs in a jovial humor to inquire of the women in the kitchen how everything was proceeding.

Now, as Royce looked at him, he thought what a striking figure he was, dressed for the holiday in his whipcord riding breeches and high boots, his gray flannel shirt open at the throat, his thinning gray hair swept back from his sensitive face, his eyes deep with thought. But for all the determined spruceness of his appearance, age was writing itself indelibly in him. His silent but alert defense against time was painfully clear.

“I doubt that your mother will be down,” Len said to Royce. His dry, whimsical smile flickered briefly. “You know how it is. She has one of her —headaches. We’ll have to keep things going just the same.”

So she wasn’t going to relent after all, Royce thought. His indignation in Len’s behalf quickly gave way to relief. It was just as well if his mother were off the scene—the guests she despised would be more at ease without her.

“Is Tess still upstairs with Mother?” Royce asked.

“Yes—commiserating—with the help of camphor ice,” Len laughed shortly. He glanced at his watch. “It’s past one. The feast is set for two, I understand. How about a little nip, just you and me? Ashbrooke’ll have had plenty by the time he gets here. And the crowd will be arriving before long.”

“Good idea, Dad. You sit down and let me fetch the fixings.”

“Not today, my boy. I’ll do the fetching and the fixing.” He grinned. “On this day the old man flies his colors. I intend to dance with every pretty girl on the shore!”

4

At seven o’clock Royce came out of the house and stood looking through the snow-feathered darkness at the lights twinkling from the barn loft. Even at this distance the muffled thunder of determined, hobnailed boots and the swinging whine of the music reached him. He laughed with sudden enjoyment. It was a relief to stand here in the cool night and listen to that artless hilarity after the exasperating scene up in his mother’s room.

He had left the dance a little while ago when a lusty circle two-step was in progress, Brade Toufang shouting the calls. He had danced with everybody—even old Mrs. Vandermeyer, who, with justification, was still proud of her nimble foot. No, he had not danced with Jo Porte. She had seemed to be constantly surrounded, and that young farmer, Lute Billings, had twice whirled her out upon the floor just as Royce approached her.

He had gone to the house, and upstairs, where he had found Teresa diverting his mother with the reading of an insipid novel. He had suggested again, even more patiently, that it might be a gracious act on Teresa’s part to appear for a while among the people in the barn in his mother’s stead. Mrs.

Hilyard had querulously exclaimed that she didn't see why that was at all necessary—weren't they having a good enough time, if one was to judge by the racket they were making? And Teresa had chimed in to the effect that she had certainly done enough when she had been present at that noisy, stuffy meal downstairs, and anyway she didn't think it fair to leave Mother Hilyard. Royce had left them without another word, closing the door behind him.

Now he began to walk back from the house to the barn. He had been afraid that the four kerosene heaters might not serve to warm up the hay mow, but he had not reckoned with the mighty activity of the Matthewses, the Torkelsons, the Dibneys, the Toufangs, and the Vandermeyers. Except for old man Baggott, all the lake people were there, from grandparents to babes in arms. They would, most of them, be going soon to their evening chores. But from their point of view at least it had been a wonderful Thanksgiving.

Home-brew and homemade wine there had been enough of, but none of the guests had shown more than amiable exhilaration. Early in the day Royce had hit upon the strategy of placing Brade Toufang in charge of ceremonies, cautioning him against permitting anyone to have too much to drink, and the device had worked on Brade like magic. He had led the celebration with such robust dignity that Royce had wanted to laugh.

Ashbrooke alone had seemed to be getting a bit out of hand. Royce had tried to excuse him because of the nervous strain he was suffering these days; if he had drunk too much it was only to see this thing through for Len's sake, to keep up the gallant show the Hilyards had tacitly agreed upon.

He mounted the barn stairs, and as he stepped into the huge, crowded loft room he found everybody silent in solemn attention to Brade Toufang's voice. In the middle of the loft, under a festoon of sheaves and yellow corn, stood the vast figure of Brade with his hand on Leonard Hilyard's shoulder. His gray-thatched head thrown back, his eyes fiery with earnestness, Brade was concluding his eloquent tribute to "a good neighbor, a true friend."

"All right, everybody! Three cheers for the finest man in three counties—Len Hilyard of Sky Valley!"

Three powerful cheers rose to the rafters. Len stood quiet, smiling unsteadily, rubbing his chin with his hand. Royce felt his throat tighten painfully. The music began again, people sought partners, and in the renewed confusion Royce slipped unobserved out the door and back down the stairs.

He walked mechanically through the dim main corridor of the great barn. More than half of the fine, modern stalls were empty now. How long would it be before . . . He set his teeth and made his way out through the south section of the building, which was in darkness. The breathy sound, the heavy, gentle stirring of horses and milch cows blurred in his ears as he passed.

The snow was falling now in large, moist clusters; Royce walked aimlessly about the yard, his hands in his pockets, the collar of his suède jacket up about his neck. It was not cold—the chill that pervaded him came from deep within.

"The Hilyards—as such, whatever that means," he thought caustically, "are just about finished. Brade Toufang—he didn't know it, the poor, good-hearted ruffian—intoned an elegy to Dad up there in the hay mow. And not only to Dad, either. To an order that's gone. From now on—what?"

He walked through the bare orchard and heard the snow plummeting softly down through the few crisp leaves that still hung; then he went by way of the Lombardies to the house and entered at a side door.

Here was the unused parlor that he and Ash and Dot had always called the Museum. He turned on a light and looked at the voluptuous, garish carpet strewn with its huge, cream-colored roses. When was it that he had first thought of it as a dairymaid who had turned prostitute but had kept her youth and looks because of lack of clients? He grinned humorlessly and opened the door to the little side hall.

Now he heard a voice, subdued but vibrant and angry, from the living room. While he stood still, his heartbeat quickening in amazement and disbelief, he recognized Ashbrooke's voice coming in response, half-bantering, half-laughing, full-bodied, and lazily assured as always. The words he could not hear, but the tones exchanged brought the blood tingling into his temples. He walked swiftly across the passage and entered the room.

He saw them. Ashbrooke had Jo Porte in his arms, and her short-sleeved dress of some nappy red woolen stuff was stripped down from her shoulders and across her full, vehemently heaving breast. She was flailing out with her clenched fists, her face was colorless, her eyes burning, while Ashbrooke laughed as he laughed only when his deepest interest was roused.

But when he saw Royce he instantly released Jo, who sank back in a chair and covered her eyes with her hands. Ashbrooke, his grin comic and

innocent, gave Royce a wavering salute and staggered out of the room toward the kitchen.

Royce stood above Jo, gazing helplessly down at her.

"Listen, Jo!" His voice sounded brittle.

She looked up at him with eyes he thought he had never seen before. He stared back and felt bewilderingly as if he were tottering forward on the balls of his feet. Abruptly he stooped and drew her up by the elbows. She was hard and soft to feel; she was like nothing he had ever touched before in his life. Her mouth was a limpid, trembling red with the blood coming back into it, so close down under his own; she was trying to smile up at him, with something awful in the smile that he seemed to remember. He tore his eyes away from the gold-shot depths of hers, looked down at her bare left shoulder and saw there a deep pinkish stain, as if a great thumb nail had once been embedded in it. Now he remembered where—and when—she had smiled like that before.

Jo flushed hotly and drew her low-necked dress up toward her throat with a violent jerk.

"What the devil has come over Ash?" Royce muttered heavily.

Her eyes were hostile. "Do you have to be told?"

"He has had too much to drink, I know. But he has been half crazy with worry lately."

"You always have an excuse ready for anything he does, haven't you? But there are some things that can't be excused. When he—"

"I know, Jo," he interrupted placatingly. "There's no excuse for—"

"I'm not talking about that," she flared. "This doesn't matter. I tried to talk to him about Goldy Matthews when he was dancing with me. But he wouldn't—"

"Goldy Matthews? What do you mean?"

"He has been seeing her—in town. She told me about it. He's not serious about her—but I know Goldy. She's in love with Ashbrooke. He's got to leave her alone, Royce. He's *got* to!"

Her voice was pleading. It was incredible, Royce thought—this business about Ashbrooke and Goldy Matthews. "Has Ash admitted to you that—"

“He admits nothing. I told you—it only made him angry. I came into the house to get away from him, but he followed me. Then he—” she hesitated, biting her lip—“he told me how pretty I was—and tried to kiss me. But I don’t care about that. He was drunk. Only—you’ve got to talk to him about Goldy.”

Royce’s face hardened. “I can’t quite see that it’s any of my business, Jo. Besides, I know Ash. Isn’t it quite possible that your little friend has been romancing a bit? I don’t know her very well, but I—”

“I might have known what to expect,” Jo said in cold fury.

She stared at him for a moment as if she were looking beyond him—then calmly went out of the room.

Chapter Four

1

From the barn door Royce could look out over the blue and white enameled spaces of the rolling northern winter, hill fields and valley fields, the sky hard and clean above them. On the rim of the north the white and blue were knit together by the sullen black of the forest, a dense weft of hemlock, spruce, and pine; and in the nearer hollows stood the tough, raddled clumps of red oak with their indecent clinging to the faded gauds of a dead year.

This was February, Royce mused, and spring was just over the edge of the constant, sun-restoring east. And yet, after yesterday's snowstorm, the thermometer on the wall outside the barn door stood now, at four o'clock in the afternoon, at twenty below zero. What a stoic, monstrous, freezing, and burning country! It was the *land* that had an invincible ego here—people, mere, small people, were overshadowed by it. That was why the north would never be a seat of culture anywhere on earth. Man, the fumbling egoist who had not even the rational order of the ant in his society, slunk away from a force like this when he wanted to prove himself superior to it.

He grinned guiltily as he thought of Teresa, down in Florida this past month with her mother. Bless her warm and frivolous little heart, she had wept stormily on leaving him to what she thought would be for him a dull and lonely winter. It had certainly been lonely—his longing for her sometimes had gnawed at him almost beyond endurance—but it had not been dull. His week-ends here at Sky Valley, his talks with his father, his long hours of work in the tower room—which had been reclaimed after his mother's departure, and was once again as his grandfather had left it—had restored his waning belief in his own ability to write a decent sentence. The years might bring their changes, but the living fiber of Ashbrooke Hilyard's imagination still dwelt in that old room.

And there had been changes, even since Thanksgiving. Alda Hilyard had left at Christmas for another visit with Dorothy and had not come back.

Royce preferred not to think of her. It was one of those things the county wagged its tongue about, but he believed that his father really didn't care. He had long ago lost his illusions about the Alda Tate he had married. That she would ever return to Sky Valley he doubted—and had said as much to Royce and Ashbrooke a week after she had gone. She was finally enjoying the superficial sort of life she had always wanted—and Len was left in peace with the earth he loved. They had parted simply and undramatically, as befitting people who had passed middle age.

But a certain other change had brought Royce a relief he admitted to himself only with angry discomfiture. In December Jo Porte's mother had died suddenly and Jo had gone home to keep house for her father. After that scene on the night of the Thanksgiving party, he had been forced to acknowledge that Jo's appeal for him, with its baffling recurrence, was specific and unmysterious. It in no way qualified his love for Teresa—because, he told himself unsparingly, it was not love. And yet he was profoundly glad when Jo left Sky Valley.

Smoke rose straight as a quill from the great stone chimney of the house against the ice-blue sky, and out in the back yard Hedvig was taking wool socks down from the clothes line. The socks were gray and stiff as frozen pickerel. The homeliness of everything about the yard sent a pleasant glow through Royce, and he was surprised to find himself thinking with regret that in another fortnight, after Teresa's return, he would not be spending his week-ends at the farm. Tessie preferred the compact snugness of their home in Carthia, where in winter the oil burner never rested and where the lavender and canary bathroom was a step from her own room.

In the living room he found Ashbrooke sprawled out on the bear rug before the blazing log fire, his wool-stockinged feet close to the hearth. He was flat on his back, contentedly smoking a cigarette and gazing at the ceiling. Royce smiled. How often, when they were home from school during their growing years, had he not seen his brother in just that carefree, winning attitude? If he only had his ukulele now instead of the cigarette, he might still be an overgrown fifteen, with the warm polish on his cheeks and forehead.

"That you, Royce?"

His father spoke from his chair beside the roll-top desk that stood now in a corner of the room. Despite Hedvig's faithful care, the room had assumed a mannishness during the past few weeks. Even if the furniture had never been touched, the fact that his mother no longer sat in the deepest chair and

crossed her plump feet out on a hassock gave the room an entirely different aura.

"Yes, Dad," Royce replied.

"I wondered what had become of you."

"I knocked off and took a walk down along the lake—east."

He threw himself into a chair near his father and began unlacing his boots. Snow had got down beneath their tops and his red wool socks were damp.

"You must be dying for a walk—going out in this weather!" Ashbrooke observed lazily. "Where'd you go?"

"It's brisk, all right. I hiked down the shore as far as the Vandermeyers'—and there was the old lady out splitting kindling! Lord, she must be close to eighty!"

"And you let her go on splitting," Ashbrooke yawned. "There's no chivalry left in the world."

"Well, if you must know, kid—I grabbed the ax and split as neat a pile of kindling as *you* ever saw. What's more, she thanked me and swore she wouldn't have believed any of the younger Hilyard fry had it in 'em! And that takes you in, Brother!"

"You didn't tell her I'm already on the way to recouping the Hilyard fortune, did you? The market scored nice gains today. We're on the way up again."

"Good! No, I didn't tell her. I don't think she's interested. She invited me in for tea and toast—and some kind of Dutch preserve made of yellow tomatoes and lemon peel and walnuts."

"Dutch, my neck! That's just plain Fallen Star Lake. And I don't like it."

"It was damned good. She's going to send me over a jar of it. I'd have brought it with me, but I came home by way of the pasture—and up through Jo's stone field."

"I didn't know it was hers," Ashbrooke said.

"She named it."

"And she can have it."

Len gave an arid, half-absent chuckle. “Not so fast, you two. I’m thinking of clearing the rocks out of that piece next summer. There’s good top soil in it.”

Royce was surprised. His father must have been examining that land, then, since heretofore it had always been regarded as worthless.

Len closed his ledger and put it away in the desk drawer. In spite of his fears the prices had held well into December and the farm had made a fair showing for the year.

“I don’t see much point in anybody breaking his back on a rock pile when he can find better land by clearing off a few acres of timber,” Ashbrooke argued.

“We’ve already gone into that,” his father replied. “We have a moral responsibility to our neighbors—on the north shore especially. If we cleared the timber up there, the top soil on those farms would be blown away in a couple of years. We’ve got to think of that.”

He got up, knocked out his pipe against the stone of the fireplace, and moved toward the door.

At the same time Hedvig could be heard in conversation with someone in the kitchen. Len Hilyard listened for a moment, then left the living room. Royce followed, Ashbrooke strolling after him with a look of indolent curiosity on his face.

In the kitchen they found Charlie Vandermeyer. Although he had just come in from the cold, beads of perspiration glistened on his forehead and his limp hair hung in wisps about his temples.

“What’s wrong, Charlie?” Len demanded, perturbed.

“We need your help,” Vandermeyer replied. “Tom Matthews’ girl is lost somewhere in the Owl Country. They sent one of the Torkelson boys over to us for help.”

“Lost!” Len exclaimed. “You mean Goldy is lost?”

“They don’t know exactly. They’re afraid something must’ve happened to her. She started over to see Jo Porte after supper last night when it quit snowin’, and she hasn’t been heard of since.”

“Last night?” Len repeated incredulously. “And you’re just looking for her now?”

"She said she was going to stay the night with Jo. But Jo was over at Tom's place this afternoon and says Goldy didn't get over to her place at all. That's the first anybody knew about it. We're tryin' to round up all the help we can before it gets too dark. They found tracks across the road near the lake, as though she meant to cut through the woods and go along the shore. But it drifted a lot last night in the wind, so they couldn't follow."

"Well—let's get going!" Royce said impatiently. "We'd better get Seth to come along."

"I talked to him," Vandermeyer said. "He'll be in the sleigh when we get out there."

But Royce was scarcely aware now of what Charlie was telling him. His eyes had fallen upon his brother's face and what he saw there sent through him a frigid thrill of dawning horror. Ashbrooke's features seemed to have lost their royal individuality, seemed to have run out of shape like melting tallow, and beneath the vigorous red-bronze he could not quite lose, the cast of his skin, too, was like tallow.

How he made his way into the living room he neither knew nor cared. The bedrock of his obstinate, loyal belief in Ashbrooke, a belief that had withstood repeated undermining attacks, had been shaken suddenly and he felt himself turning sick.

Mechanically he sat down and drew on his high boots. The laces were maddening in his hurrying fingers. Ashbrooke had come into the room and was standing now, Royce knew without glancing up, beside the fireplace lighting a cigarette.

"Look here, Ash—you don't know anything about this, do you?"

"How the hell should *I* know anything about it?" Ashbrooke's voice sounded high, reedy, as it had in the old days at school when he shouted denial to some petty treasonable offense.

"You remember—I warned you last fall—after what Jo Porte told me."

"Damn Jo Porte!"

The blood was threshing like knouts against the walls of Royce's brain, and for one horrible instant he felt all self-control leaving him. But the instant mercifully passed and in its wake came frozen logic: he would have to get out of this room, out of Ashbrooke's presence at once. He must not so much as glance at him on his way out.

"Aren't you coming?" he asked.

“Somebody ought to be here when Glover comes out to look over that young bull,” Ashbrooke said. “There’ll be enough of you without me, anyhow. I told Dad I’d stay.”

Royce took two or three strides to the door, and although he did not look Ashbrooke’s way he was electrically conscious of how he stood with his elbow propped on the mantel, his cigarette affectedly between his middle and ring fingers, as usual.

2

Len Hilyard was already sitting beside Charlie Vandermeyer, and Seth Hornblow was hunched on the straw-covered floor of the sleigh when Royce came out into the yard. The horses’ breaths were palpably blue in the rosily thin, bitter air of early evening. Poplar shadows stretched out upon the glittering drifts, precisely spaced bars of pure indigo. There would not be much of daylight left.

Royce swung himself up into the sleigh beside Seth Hornblow. With a plangent ring of shod hoofs on the ice-crusted snow of the driveway, the sleigh started off down the hill. Except for Charlie Vandermeyer’s occasional clucking to his horses and Seth’s huddled blowing of his nose between mittened thumb and forefinger, there was no sound from the men. One pitiless certainty united them all in mute shock, sympathy, grief: no human creature could have survived the past night and day in the white death spell of the forest. Idle conjecture could neither mitigate nor render more appalling that harsh truth.

Charlie Vandermeyer cleared his throat roughly. “ ’Course, she might of seen a deer and followed it just for fun down into the peat bog and got herself tangled in one of them holes and couldn’t get out. Must have been something like that. That girl—she had—she’s got a way with deer. They come right up to her. I saw ’em do it myself!”

There was an incongruous note of defiance in his statement, as if he expected someone to challenge it. But Royce knew it for what it was—an ingenuous device to evade a stark issue.

“There’s no chance she might have got a lift into town with somebody, I suppose?” Royce suggested. Even as he put the question he knew it was

only a device of his own to escape for a moment from his oppressive thought of Ashbrooke.

"Not a chance," Vandermeyer declared. "Nobody's been over this road today. And you couldn't put a car over it, that's a cinch!"

"Not likely," Royce agreed.

For all of Charlie's urging his horses it seemed an interminable time before the sleigh reached the point at which, by the marks in the snow, one could see where the search party had entered the timber on the side toward the lake. Presently they heard voices hallooing back and forth through the snow-festooned tangle of firs and naked, eerily lighted hardwoods. Three or four figures appeared dark against the blue-white clearing ahead of them. A horse, its muzzle shaggy with frost, an old piece-quilt thrown over its back, stood patiently in the shafts of an ancient cutter at one side of the road where it had been hitched to a tree.

Vandermeyer pulled up beside the cutter and jumped down from his seat.

"Any luck yet?" he barked out.

Mrs. Dibney, Brade Toufang and his daughter-in-law, Myra, and Tom Matthews made up the group. Their faces were pinched with cold, their eyes somber with failure. Royce believed he would never forget the bent, half-crouching figure of Tom Matthews as he stood there, moving from one foot to the other, clasping his mittened hands.

"Nothin' so far," said Brade, while Tom merely looked up as if tongue-tied, his eyes bulging. "We're splittin' up and crisscrossin' between the lake and the road—east an' west, instead o' north an' south. There's about fifty of us all told, countin' the women an' kids. Torkelson's built a fire down to the beach and they've got hot coffee goin'. We're bound to—" His words, with their brief pause, smote upon the brittle air like the crack of a whip. "We're bound to find something—soon."

"Yes—soon!" Tom Matthews' voice, echoing the word, seemed like the voice of the vast upper crystal arc of darkening cold. He jerked off his mittens and blew on his hands.

"Where's the girl's mother?" Len asked.

"She's to home," Toufang said. "Mrs. Torkelson's stayin' with her."

"Well, where do we start, Brade?" Royce asked brusquely.

“You start in right where you are. Spread out about forty feet apart, all o’ you, and look in under all the snarls o’ vines and stuff. Work careful if you don’t want to break a leg. And when you meet some o’ the others comin’ up from the lake, spread out more, north an’ south. That way we’ll checkerboard the whole place before dark.” He watched them take their places, then stepped up to Len Hilyard. “Better take it slow an’ easy. This ain’t a soft job we got here.”

“A terrible job!” Len muttered. “Come on—we’d better not waste time.”

Royce glanced at his father’s face as they set off, plunging through the snow-filled ditch and into the bright and dark glimmering confusion of the forest. What would Len Hilyard be thinking now if Jo Porte had gone to him about Ashbrooke and the Matthews girl? Royce reflected that there was probably little danger of his ever hearing about it now. He despised himself for the involuntary relief he felt. But the blow would have been shattering to his father, with his code of aloof and austere self-discipline.

While he struggled eastward across the southern extremity of the area of search, through the low swamp region of the Owl Country, Royce found himself beset by an uncanny sense of being somehow disembodied. Even the grim task at hand—the thrusting aside of ragged underbrush and frozen, matted tentacles of vines and snow ledges on the dense evergreens—seemed to have no reality. Even the effort of stumbling through drifts up to his knees, drifts that were treacherous with snaggled roots and rotten logs, could not free him from the thick lethargy which lay upon him like some abominable spell. Now and then his father, or one of the men farther beyond, would call out, and the sound was as grotesque and repellent in the frigid silence as the spreading, distorted shadows of the trees on the twilit snow. Royce felt the sluggish and naked birth of some dreadful thing within his own consciousness. He glanced south across a violet-tinted hollow and saw, limned against the open stain of the winter sunset, a young doe standing, a pure, transfixed profile of bronze.

It was then that he knew what thought had been creeping inexorably to the surface of his mind. Goldy Matthews had not met with any accident in these woods. She had given herself up deliberately to this white cloister of eternal sleep, and the reason for her act was Ashbrooke Hilyard.

The conviction came upon him with such stunning force that he was obliged to lean for a moment against the grizzled trunk of an old poplar in a struggle to regain his self-possession. He rested his arm against the tree and laid his forehead on the crook of his elbow. But his reeling brain rejected the

coherence his will attempted to force upon it; over and over again, in the very pit of his mind, spun the monotonous thought, “This is an intolerable thing! This is an intolerable thing!”

He did not hear the light crackle of branches behind him. Jo Porte, wading through the snow, pulled aside the reddish wisps of a marsh willow and gazed with darkened, bitterly scornful eyes at Royce’s stooping figure.

“It’s really you!” she said.

Royce straightened, swung about, and looked at her. Darkness was rapidly merging with the silver and steel-blue of trees and snow light, but in the obscurity Jo Porte’s face was vivid and lifted as some proud frost flower.

“Yes,” Royce said dully. “How did you happen to come here?”

She carelessly inclined her head northward. “They told me you had come out. I came down to convince myself it was true.”

“Well, now that you’re satisfied—hadn’t we better get back on the job?”

Her fixed, contemptuous regard wavered in brief wonderment. His voice was hoarse and she could see that his eyes were bloodshot. Had he realized at last that Ashbrooke was responsible for this? His haggard look persuaded her that he had. She straightened her shoulders and drew her mouth hard.

“You must know what happened to Goldy.”

“Do you know?”

“She told me. I was the only one she told—unless your brother. But when they find her—they’ll all know. They won’t know who is to blame for it. But I know because she told me. And you know—whether you’ll admit it or not.”

“Shut up!” Royce cried. “Can’t you see I’m almost crazy thinking about it? Go and tell them—do your damnedest!”

From the northward came the triumphant baying of dogs. Jo threw her head back and listened.

“Baggott’s pack!” she said suddenly.

Almost immediately a shrill whistle tore the white silence.

A wild, dry sob burst from Jo’s throat. She turned from Royce and started to run northward, while he stood as if rooted to the ground. He stared after the swift figure and was aware of no thought in his numbed brain except that Jo was clad in a suit of some thick green woolen stuff, with a

white woolen toque on her head. She was wearing moccasins and heavy knitted white socks. When she had disappeared among the trees Royce gave a smothered groan and started after her.

In a little while he came upon his father and Seth Hornblow threshing through the maze of underbrush in the direction from which the whistle had come.

"You'd better go back to the road, Dad," Royce said wearily. "They must have found something. I'll go up and see."

"All right, my boy." Len's lean, aging face was deeply scored with emotion. "This is terrible—terrible!"

As he turned away with Seth, Royce thought grimly that he only half knew how terrible it was.

He had not far to walk before he heard voices coming muffled and somber from the opaque gloom of a narrow ravine. A dog barked once and was silenced by a soft, quick command which Royce recognized as Phineas Baggott's. Then he saw the old man moving westward, his dogs at heel. Royce broke through a sumac thicket, looked down into the little snow-filled gully and saw there a stricken-faced group of fifteen or twenty people, men whose features were wry with the strain of barely leashed feeling, and women sobbing. Kneeling on the ground beside a denlike hollow roofed over by fallen logs and interlaced briers on the opposite slope of the ravine were Jo Porte and Tom Matthews.

A violent shudder passed through Royce from head to foot. With the final extremity of his will he stepped forward and down to the group in the ravine, his face an expressionless, stony mask.

Jo Porte did not look up at him. She was crouching beside the body of Goldy Matthews, gazing at her with steadfast, tearless eyes and stroking one of the blue-white, stiffened small hands from which she had removed the brown woolen mitten. Goldy lay curled in the deep snow beneath the overhanging brambles, one hand under the blanched, childish oval of her cheek, as if she had gone to sleep in peace and warmth and happiness. Royce's eyes throbbed suddenly with an unendurable heat of tears. He could not look at Tom Matthews, whose shoulders, as he sat bowed forward, were heaving in a silent convulsion of grief.

Royce turned to Charlie Vandermeyer and said quietly, "What are you waiting for?"

“We can’t carry her—like that,” Charlie whispered. “She’s frozen—stiff. Torkelson’s bringin’ his kid’s sled.”

“God, yes, of course!” Royce groaned softly.

Even as he spoke there was a sound from the upper pocket of the gully, and glancing that way he saw Torkelson coming with the sled.

It required but a minute or two now to do what must be done, and it was done by Brade Toufang and Charlie Vandermeyer, with only a few curt words passing between them. Gently they lifted the rigidly enfolded body of the dead girl and laid it upon the sled, covering it then with a blanket and lashing it securely with rope. During the dreary process, Royce asked only one question, addressing Brade in a low tone.

“Did you examine her at all—to see if there was any injury?”

Brade nodded. “We couldn’t find nothin’. Maybe she got faint or somethin’ and just laid down for a minute.”

It was almost dark now, but not too dark for Royce to see the fierce glitter of Jo Porte’s eyes fixed upon his own. When Vandermeyer began to draw the sled carefully westward through the ravine, some of the men leading the way and breaking a path for him, the others following in sorrowful straggling file, Jo Porte turned and proceeded swiftly in the opposite direction.

One compulsion emerged from Royce’s feeling with undeniable clarity. He must follow her, he must do what he could to remove that look of shining hatred from her eyes.

“Jo seems pretty upset, Brade,” he said softly. “I’d better go back and look after her.”

Brade nodded. Royce set off at a rapid stride through the snow, angrily thrusting aside clawing branches as he went.

It was in a small clearing not far from the lake shore that he caught up with her. The early night gleam from snow and frosted trees had now the hard and forbidding tone of zinc.

“Jo!” he said sharply, and grasped her arm as she tried to run from him.

“Let go of me!” she gasped. “Leave me alone!”

Royce’s heartbeat quickened in the strange exhilaration of struggling with her. She was uncommonly strong for a girl. By main force he swung her shoulders about.

"Jo!" he entreated, his voice hoarse. "You must let me talk to you."

"I talked to you once!" she broke out fiercely. "You wouldn't listen then. Let me go, damn you! Damn all of you Hilyards!"

She tore herself free and struck him in the face with her open palm. Royce drew his clenched fist across his mouth and blinked down at her.

"Thanks," he said calmly. "That was coming to me."

She stared at him in the closely knitting, steely darkness. From somewhere near, as if in mocking comment, came the unfathomable and ominous hooting of a great-horned owl. Jo remembered with hard pain another time when that sound had shaken her senses, that sound which she had always imagined as echoing from some unholy cavern in the air. Then, from beyond the trees a short distance away, came the long-drawn guttural roar and boom of the lake ice.

Jo began to tremble suddenly, buried her face in her hands, and broke into ungovernable tears.

Awkward with earnestness, Royce stooped and drew her roughly into the circle of his arm. She stumbled against him, her hands still covering her face.

He rushed into incoherent speech then, flaming with dismay at his own violent awareness of this physical contact with her. The third time, now—like a wild, recurrent dream. It was unthinkable! In the very face of this day's tragedy, so blightingly touching upon his own life, some profound and elemental strain in his nature had wakened again to humiliate and confuse him.

"I'll never forgive myself," he was saying thickly, while his arm grew taut about Jo's inert shoulder. "I couldn't believe what you told me, Jo—because I *wouldn't* believe it! But this afternoon, when they came to our place and told us she—she was lost, I saw Ashbrooke's expression, and then I knew. Jo, you—" his voice broke—"you've got to listen to me! Please—try to stop crying for a minute!" He shook her gently.

Jo straightened back from him, but she could not look up at his eyes. Shame and hatred of herself, more than of Royce, now, ran over her in scalding waves. She had struck him, a savage joy sweeping her up in that moment, while in the next an unbearable desolation had descended upon her. For very clear to her suddenly were his bitter regret and pain in this thing that had come to pass, and her wild crying had been, then, not so much for Goldy Matthews who was beyond the reach of tears, as it had been for

Royce Hilyard in his shattering disillusionment and for herself in the lonely terror of her fixed and hateful love.

"Don't say anything—now," she replied almost inaudibly. "I'm sorry—I hit you. I didn't know then—how terrible it is for you—because of Ashbrooke. It's all—dreadful! Everything in the world is!"

Royce stepped toward her suddenly, his hands on her forearms, his eyes dark and burning in the white, cold-starred dusk. He was searching for something which he felt with an inward shaking and yet with fierce exultation should be there in her vivid, shadowed face. He must know, he thought recklessly, whatever the appalling circumstances of this night—he must know what it was in Jo Porte that roused within him a mad and unrecognizable other self. Once knowing, he would be able to destroy that other self in a sane facing of it.

"Why do you look at me like that?" Jo breathed.

He stepped back from her in shock, with a sense of having been wakened by a sharp blow from some fantastic dream. In the same instant she turned and began running with incredible lightness and speed through the drifts to the lake shore, a blurred unreal thing to him in the blur of snow and trees and stars.

Chapter Five

1

Royce leaned against a Lombardy and permitted his eyes to drift with an obscurely satirical glint over the crowd that had gathered in the shade of the grove. It had come at last, he thought to himself, and could have wished himself dead rather than stand here a witness to it. Who would have dreamed, even a year ago, that Len Hilyard would be auctioning off half the furniture in his house and the greater part of his remaining livestock in order to pay taxes on the land he still held and meet the expenses of a greatly reduced standard of living?

There was, among these people who had come from farms and villages and even from Carthia, not a little malicious gloating at the spectacle of the Hilyards' crumbling fortune. Royce could sense it in the very air he breathed. The feeling was not shared by Len's neighbors, however. Whatever resentment they may have harbored from time to time was confused and weakened now in their common dismay at his distress. For three generations they had regarded with an almost personal pride the soaring white house on its eminence above Fallen Star Lake, and now that ill times had descended upon it they suffered within themselves an indignant sense of betrayal which they could not have put into words.

But it had to be. There was little consolation to be drawn from the fact that farmers in every part of the country were relinquishing their fertile acres to satisfy bankers who, in their turn, were closing their doors because the land they held in security had so shrunken in value that they could no longer satisfy their creditors. It was all right to accuse Ashbrooke of squandering his father's resources, and to call Len a fool for stripping his purse in order to keep his son out of jail for his questionable handling of other people's money. And it was easy enough to damn Wilbur Jaffey for his heartless demands, reminding him that he could not get blood out of a stone. They had all gone into the game together—and they had all lost.

People from every part of the county, and from neighboring counties as well, were seated under the shade of the Lombardies, although it was not yet mid-morning and the sale had been advertised to begin at ten o'clock. But there were those who would rise before dawn to be on hand for an auction sale. Besides, this was no ordinary sale where you knew beforehand exactly what the bedsteads would look like, where you were dubious about buying a mattress with kerosene spots along its seams, and where a bed spring always looked as if a stupendous egg had once been laid in its middle. There was about this sale the piquancy of the mysterious and unguessable, for with the exception of those who had attended the Thanksgiving party, not many of the country people had ever seen the inside of the Hilyard house. There were some, Royce knew, who cherished little hope of being able to buy any of the reputed treasures that were to be disposed of, no matter how low the asking price. They had come out of frank and unapologetic curiosity, grateful for this, their first and last opportunity to glimpse the trappings of a family life which had become legend.

Royce did not like to think of all that had gone into the making of that legend. Much of it came to him now with pride—his grandfather, his father, the affection of the men and women among whom they had lived, the house in which he himself had been born, the broad fields, the shining lake where the reeds stood along the shore, the dense woodland that still haunted his dreams as it had done when he was a small boy. All might vanish with the years, but the memory would never wane. The years, too, would soften the bitterness he felt whenever he thought of his mother's desertion. After all, it was just as well that she had not come back to Sky Valley. She could not have stood this. There was another memory, too—it seared like a hot iron now as he glanced across to where Tom Matthews and his wife sat together on a pine bench close to the auctioneer's platform. His eyes went beyond them, down across the lake, to the dark shore of the Owl Country. He could almost see the very spot where they had found Goldy Matthews on that afternoon in February, nearly a year and a half ago. Thank God, no one—outside himself and Jo Porte—had ever learned the truth of that! There were times when Dr. John Murdoch had hinted—well, the old doctor's brain was probably packed with ugly secrets that would never be told.

Royce glanced at his watch. Ed Murphy, the auctioneer, had not yet appeared, although it was ten minutes of ten. The windless air was already beginning to ripple and jig in membranes of heat. People were getting restless. Several pieces of furniture were partly exposed under the tarpaulins there on the grass behind the auctioneer's place, but what could be seen was not sufficient to keep everybody indefinitely engrossed. Besides, the heat

was gradually making a gray woolen blanket of the poplar shade. Royce looked about him uneasily and wished Ed Murphy would come. Better get it over with.

2

Over the golden head of her two-year-old Steve, young Dora Vandermeyer fastened her determined gaze upon the satin-smooth panel of a table that winked out with shadowed rosiness from beneath the canvas fifteen feet away. Tim Bates, the county sheriff, already half asleep, stood near it, leaning against a tree. Everyone knew that Len Hilyard, a good friend of Tim's, had merely asked him here this morning to keep peace and order. This was no sheriff's sale. But his presence *did* have something nasty about it to Dora's way of thinking. Fred had said that Len had invited Tim out of a sense of humor, but for the life of her Dora could see nothing humorous in that.

She nudged her husband and arched her eyebrows toward the table she had been staring at for ten minutes.

"That must be it, Fred," she whispered, and glancing across saw that the blue and lively eyes of Sarah Toufang were also pinned on that plane of lustrous wood beneath the tarpaulin. Sarah was sitting beside her young sister-in-law, Nancy, who looked rather pale. Heavens, was Nancy going to have another baby? Why, it was only—

"What must be it?" Fred asked irritably. He was positive a wood tick had lodged upon him in a place where he could not decently remove it.

"Alda Hilyard's drop-leaf cherry, you fool!" Dora muttered between her teeth. "Your mother and I saw it that time at the Thanksgiving party. We remember good furniture if you don't."

Just then the eyes of Dora Vandermeyer and Sarah Toufang met across a lane of dancing heat, and immediately where there had been homely neighborliness there was established a fierce contest of wills over an object the value of which was comprehensible to neither of the two young women. Dora gave an evasive smile; Sarah smiled and nodded knowingly. They were not to be friends again until they were both in the grip of catastrophe, some years from this dramatic July day.

But Charlie Vandermeyer, Fred's father, was not thinking of the drop-leaf cherry. He had caught sight of Len Hilyard standing for a moment at one of the windows of the big house and looking out over the crowd that occupied the benches under the trees. Something in Len's face had touched Charlie's heart. Well, there was nothing he could do about it. Len had owned too much land—everyone thought the same about that. There was no sense in a man's trying to operate two sections in this part of the state, with what he had in timber and brush farms, even though he had inherited a snug amount of cash from his father. Old Ashbrooke would have done something about it before he got himself into this fix. Len had let his damn fool family ruin him—that was the answer! Still, he must surely have a little something tucked away for a rainy day. Fellows like Len Hilyard always had. They came out all right in the end. It was men like himself who suffered the most when it came right down to it. Just the same, he felt sorry for Len. It'd be too bad if—

"There's Ed Murphy now," Dora announced, and settled her two-year-old in the crook of her other arm.

3

Jo Porte regretted bitterly that she had consented to come here this morning. She had known last night, when Tom Matthews had been over to talk with her father, that the people about the lake were feeling sorry for the Hilyards, and she had suddenly hated them all for their mawkish sentimentality. Why couldn't they be hard and clearheaded, as old Ashbrooke Hilyard must have been? Listening to the soft, muddled talk, she had decided to attend the sale for one purpose only—she would bid to the end of her chicken money for that carpet with the big roses in it, which had stuck in her mind like a dull barb since she was fourteen.

Now that she was here, all she could think of was the brutal dismantling of the house that had carried, like a shield before it, old Ashbrooke's tower! The Stately Mansion—her mouth shook for a lost dream—was being emptied of a rich past and would live now only in her memory of it.

Jo averted her eyes from the sheets of canvas which covered the evicted spirit of the Hilyard house; she could think of those furnishings—the mirrors and claw-foot tables, the china closets and plush chairs—as nothing else. Rolled up on the ground at the foot of one of the poplars was the carpet with

its precious roses; she knew it by one corner which curled outward like a pouting, ripe lip. Like a Hilyard lip.

Her throat felt suddenly taut and dry. Only a few steps away Royce Hilyard lounged against a tree, his arms folded in negligent tranquillity across his white shirt front, a half smile on his full handsome mouth. Only his eyes were hard, with the blue in them like new steel. All at once his black straight lashes seemed to give a startled jerk down over his eyes, his gaze darkening obliquely from the acid brightness of a moment before. He was looking directly at her. A sick, thrilling weakness swept the length of her body. Her lips stiffly resisted the effort she made at a polite, meaningless smile, while her eyes stared back into his in a way that she felt with strangely detached horror must be stretched and bare. Though she tried to turn her head, her will was powerless against his fixed, shadowed regard. Then, to her flaming mortification, he glanced idly away as if that fragment of time had never paused there between them, a rigid, terrifying, palpable thing.

She got up quickly. "It's so hot, Dad," she said to her father. "I'm going to get a drink of water."

He glanced at her and frowned. "You're lookin' sort o' pale."

"Keep my place. I'll be back in a minute."

She squeezed past a fat woman wielding a huge palm leaf fan—a woman she had never seen before who scowled up at her and refused to budge. As she made her way through the poplar grove toward the great, silver-vaned windmill, she caught snatches of talk among the people sitting or standing beneath the trees.

". . . thought mebbe they might be sellin' the piano, and I got fifteen dollars I could 'a' give for it. Jenny wants our Pearl to take lessons. She's got real talent, Pearl has. But I see they ain't got the piano on the list. S'pose they want to keep a little tony even yet!"

". . . ain't none of us makin' enough to pay taxes on what we have without buyin' up more, no matter how cheap it is."

". . . no sense movin' out now. Things ain't better anywhere else."

Jo passed swiftly out of the grove into the sun that was pouring liquid fire down into the barn yard. Seth Hornblow was driving two deep-chested grays to the watering trough when she reached the windmill.

“Hullo, Jo!” he greeted her, his narrow, seamed face crinkling into one of his rare smiles. “What are *you* doing here at this damn fool circus?”

Jo laughed. “What’s everybody doing, Seth? Just now I want a drink of cold water.”

“You bet!” Seth started the pump going, rinsed the dipper, filled it, and handed it to Jo. She looked down at the coin of rust in the worn bottom of it before she drank. Queer, how nearly identical that spot was to the one in the dipper at home! You didn’t expect it here somehow—even now.

“I was ready to faint back there in the crowd,” she said as she handed the dipper back.

“Ain’t likely to start for a while yet, neither,” Seth said. “Nothin’ ever does, ’specially when you’re waitin’—unless church, an’ that never ends. Might as well walk down to the barn with me. It’s a mite cooler there.”

He turned the horses into the shady corral and Jo walked ahead of him to the barn.

The wide doors were open. She stepped lightly into the cool, immaculately kept aisle between the spacious, modern stalls and sniffed the agreeably mingled odors of cattle, feed, ammonia, and some faint disinfectant. Still, the old-fashioned stable at home, with its litter of straw and manure worked right down into the coarse floor boards so that no scraping could ever remove it, its odds and ends of harness and old horse blankets and cart wheels hanging about the walls, had a pungent coziness in it that this splendid enclosure had not.

“ ’Tain’t much of a place now, is it?” Seth said. “Them stalls used to be filled. Wasn’t much room left in ’em even when you was workin’ here. Got nothin’ to put in ’em now—and won’t have.”

In sudden surprise, Jo heard a throaty laugh. She glanced forward, but could see no one beyond the long double row of stalls. A silence, puzzling in its very emptiness, followed the laugh, and during that short, suspended space Jo knew with certainty that it was Teresa’s laugh she had heard.

“He’s makin’ a mistake,” Seth observed in a confidential tone, “sellin’ a lot of his stuff here so’s he can pay taxes on his timber land and hang on to it. What’s his timber goin’ to bring him in these times, eh? But he’s got a feelin’ for them woods—same as his father had before him. He won’t even talk about it.”

Jo glanced back and saw Teresa and Ashbrooke Hilyard strolling away from the extreme end of the stable at arm's length from each other. Teresa had her hands in the pockets of her yellow linen dress while she pointed her high-heeled slippers out one after the other in a pretty, half dancing step. Ashbrooke was touching a lighter to his cigarette as if he had not a care in the world.

Jo's cheeks grew hot with indignation—for Len Hilyard's sake. Seth Hornblow was talking, but she scarcely heard what he was saying. Out in the sunlight again, she felt the blistering heat on her eyelids, but it seemed now to come rather from something flaming within herself.

"Looks like they're started," Seth said, and nodded toward the poplar grove, where Ed Murphy was holding forth expansively in spite of the sweltering heat.

4

The sale had progressed for almost two hours, the sun had risen to the white-hot crater of noon, and the two hundred and fifty pound auctioneer had run a river of sweat from himself to the platform where he stood. Dora Vandermeyer had recklessly outbid Sarah Toufang, and for a matter of five dollars and sixty cents the drop-leaf cherry now rested in the back of the Vandermeyer truck. Sarah, close to tears but head high, had marched off the scene, her husband Clinton sheepishly following. While they drove away in their spring wagon, a crystal chandelier, a pair of ball fringe curtains, and a love-seat piled carefully behind them, Sarah gave a chagrined backward glance at the cherry table standing in her neighbors' truck. The disk of sun glittered upon it like a red-gold medallion. "Fifteen cents more would've done it!" she reproached her husband bitterly. "To think you could be so darned stingy when you knew—" "Stingy!" Clinton exploded in exasperation. "We spent seven dollars already for the stuff we got—and God knows what we're goin' to do with it in our house! Crystal chandeliers—my God, woman!" Sarah drew a profound, hurt breath and was silent. She knew that back in the poplar grove Dora Vandermeyer was still sitting enjoying her triumph, although little Steve was hot as a pudding in her arms.

The elder Vandermeyers and Toufangs had looked upon the contest with cynical amusement. Let the young ones wrangle over a piece of Hilyard wood if they wanted to! They'd learn soon enough that it wasn't what you

had in your house that mattered—and the Hilyards themselves sure had found that out.

Nothing else exciting had happened during those two hours. A camp chair had collapsed under big Grandma Nielson; a baby in the last stages of whooping cough had gone black in the face; a farm girl and a strange young man from town had caught each other's eye and had wandered casually out of the grove toward the deeper woods on the lake shore.

But now, as though it had lingered to the very end in the possession of the Hilyards, the parlor rug was being unrolled at last. Ed Murphy was smoothing out the rich billows of it and draping it over the edge of the platform where it would appear to advantage.

Jo Porte craned forward, the cords of her neck standing out whitish in her sunburned skin. All at once she wanted to laugh out loud. The rug was absurdly ornate. It would look ridiculous in the Porte cabin, in its present form and color. Well, she would have it dyed. The deathless roses would sink into the oblivion of solid midnight blue, and when she was through with scissors and tape her father's bedroom, as well as the living room, would be snug against floor drafts all winter long.

She listened to the preliminary bidding and to Ed Murphy's hortative bleat. The fat woman sitting beside her had been the first to speak. There was a crisp determination about her, but Jo smiled with inner confidence. She had four dollars of her own, and she would spend it all if it was necessary. The rug would be hers—it simply had to be—and she felt no shame as she thought of her reason for wanting it. The rug was a symbol of her years of emotional subjugation to the Hilyards. Once it was hers she would treat it as she pleased. The thought set up within her a small fever of excitement. Her eyes were dilated and unnaturally brilliant. Her lips moved nervously as she leaned forward and prepared to enter the bidding.

"I have three dollars!" Ed Murphy bawled angrily. "Three dollars for this magnificent oriental—"

"Three and a half!" Jo cried breathlessly.

"A half!" Ed echoed, his flagging spirit brightening. "I'm offered three and a half. Who'll make it four? Look at these here roses—good as new! Who'll—"

"Three seventy-five!" the fat woman beside Jo said with sudden vindictiveness.

Jo stood up from the bench, her heart beating suffocatingly. “I’ll pay four!”

She could feel everybody’s eyes upon her.

The fat woman tried to push Jo aside so that she herself might rise. “Five dollars!” she shouted, lurched to her feet, and almost threw Jo off her balance.

“That’s talkin’!” Ed Murphy croaked. “Do I hear five twenty-five?” He was bewildered, but there was no sense in egging these females on too far. They might come to blows and then he’d be left with the old relic on his hands.

“Five fifty!” Jo cried furiously.

Ernest Porte, embarrassed and alarmed, tugged at her skirt. “Jo—what’s got into you? ’Tain’t worth it—that rag! Sit down!”

The fat woman looked at Jo’s father, then rolled her eyes about as if she had been suddenly panic-stricken. She had a confused notion all at once that she had made the last bid, and now it dawned on her that she was probably being smartly swindled. She sat down with a thud, the pine board sagging beneath her almost to the snapping point.

“Sold to Miss Jobina Porte!” Ed Murphy bellowed, wiping his forehead and then waving his handkerchief in the air. Without another word he sank to the stool beside the platform and rested his head on his hands. The sale was over.

People began moving away slowly. Ernest Porte rolled the carpet up and called to Lute Billings to help him carry it out of the grove. Jo followed them, her head throbbing from the intense heat. But that pain was in no way comparable to the dull ache of futility in her breast. She regretted miserably now the spectacle she had made of herself, and except that it would have made matters ten times worse she would gladly have left the rug behind.

“Jo!”

She turned dispiritedly and looked up as Royce Hilyard touched her elbow. His smile was strained—warped, Jo thought.

“I just wanted to know what on earth made you buy that moth-eaten rug,” he said at once. “You acted as if your life depended on your getting it.”

Jo held herself erect. “What does anyone buy a carpet for?” she asked primly.

He gave a short laugh. “To walk on, I suppose.”

“Exactly.”

Royce nodded. “Especially—that one, eh?”

Her arms stiffened at her sides. She glanced beyond the trees to where her father and Lute Billings were clumsily loading the carpet into the car.

“I’m not blaming you, Jo,” Royce said then. “Only—it’s scarcely the time to be spiteful, is it? Dad sent me to tell you that if he had known you wanted the rug he’d have given it to you. He wants to give it to you now.”

Jo suddenly felt all courage ebbing out of her body. She wanted, more than anything else, to burst into dreary tears.

“I—I couldn’t take it—like that,” she managed to say.

“But you paid too much for it, anyhow. It’ll probably fall apart before you get it home.”

“If it does, I’ll be saved the trouble of having it dyed,” she retorted, and turned toward the driveway. “Dad is waiting for me.”

But he walked beside her out of the grove, his feeling of impotent anger rapidly mounting; anger at himself, at Jo Porte for her relentless existence on the rim of his life, anger at the dragging smallness of the morning’s scene among the Lombardies which he had always felt were secure in their dignity.

“Won’t you all come up to the house for lemonade?” he invited when he had come to where Ernest Porte and Lute Billings stood waiting for Jo.

“Better be gettin’ back home, Royce,” Ernest replied pleasantly. “Got a heap o’ work waitin’ to be done. Thanks just the same. Lute’s comin’ along to give me a hand with the cultivatin’.”

Royce waved his hand as he turned away. “Sorry.”

As he started back toward the house a voice full of untroubled, untouched gaiety broke upon him. Teresa, her lifted hands making a wide, brilliant halo of her hair against the sunlight, was coming down the path at the edge of the grove.

“Royce, darling! We’re waiting for you. Neal Whitman just came—and Cecily Burton with him. We’re going to throw a party in the parlor.”

Part Three

THE STONE FIELD

Chapter One

1

The tiger lilies had burned themselves out to pallid tapers, and now the roadsides and sunlit wastes were shaggy with goldenrod. One summer, then two, then three, had folded back into the past, and Jo Porte, in their vanishing, had grown to know the implacable nature of time. Now that three years had passed since she bought the flowered carpet at the auction sale in the Lombardy grove, she could see the seasons swinging upward once more toward winter, with autumn like the hands of a clock that stood at evening.

This sense of time's orbit, and her own tranced pause, would come upon her frighteningly in the midst of the most familiar tasks. It would seem to her then that it was not she, Jo Porte, who was washing the separator or ironing her father's Sunday shirt, but some calm and submissive stranger who had mysteriously taken possession of Jo Porte's body.

She was waiting again, through these slow, lambent days—as she had so often waited before, it seemed—for something to happen. It would not be a good thing, she knew. Phineas Baggott had said, "There's a conspiracy of the seasons against the Hilyards!" It was no use for her to tell herself that she was too much alone, that she was becoming morbid and permitting old Baggott's dour, wishful predictions to color her imagination. The waiting was there, from day to day, after this past summer of fierce drought and dust storms that made of the sun a malevolent, sick eye. Some might have said that her apprehensiveness grew out of this dreadful summer, when beet tops lay like burnt rags in the garden and corn ears were empty husks. Nerves stronger than Jo's had snapped under the strain. But she would have laughed at any such explanation. The waiting was there, in sky, on earth, an inexorable presence above and below the Hilyards, surrounding them, existing in them.

Jo surveyed the gabled room she had just scoured and swept of cobwebs for another season of isolating cold. Since Ernest had built the log siding wing on to the lower part of the house and this was no longer her room, it

was used now for the storage of clothes, bedding, sacks of feed, medicines for the livestock, broken furniture, and useless, anonymous clutter Ernest could not bring himself to part with. Rolled up in a corner behind Jo's old trundle bed was the rose-strewn carpet she had bought at the Hilyard sale.

It was securely tied up with rope, as it had been when Ernest lugged it out of Lute's car and dragged it into the house on the blistering day that marked even more clearly now, in retrospect, the beginning of the Hilyards' disintegration. The rope had never been undone; Jo had never again looked upon the luscious pattern of the carpet's unbelievable florescence. It had lain undisturbed in the attic corner, except for the times, twice a year, when she had pulled it out to clean house. For the carpet had no sooner become hers than her exuberant hatred of it had died, and with it all the desire to stamp it out as a symbol of that hatred. She could even laugh a little bitterly at that childish impulse now after all that had happened.

She looked from the attic window at the lake that sparkled dimly under a blue haze. Beyond the crescent of the cove the islands floated like blazing cumulus clouds of magenta and scarlet and thin gold, broken at intervals by the black shafts of the pines. The sweet, faintly scorched smell of many pitifully small harvests drifted in through the open window on a wandering, drowsy breeze. The September afternoon was downy as a ripe peach and as mockingly soft as that other afternoon just twelve months ago.

It had been just such a day a year ago, and what she had been doing today she had done then.

She turned from the window, her fingers pressed against hot temples. She had been working too hard, of course. . . . But it suddenly seemed as if she must hurry downstairs and get herself ready for someone who was coming to see her. This day had that power. This day, so like that day a year ago.

She sat down on the top step of the narrow slot of a stairway, and with elbows on knees and palms against her cheeks she looked calmly back now into that day, knowing that it had to be as it was. . . .

2

Alec and Laura Keefe—it was they who were coming to see her this afternoon. She must hurry to get herself ready for them. In the kitchen

downstairs she dipped water from the stove reservoir into the wooden washtub, then dragged the tub into her bedroom. From the kitchen cabinet she brought a fresh bar of soap and a rough crash towel. While she undressed she looked at the bar of soap lying in a saucer on the floor. It was a plain, homely-smelling soap, white with runnels of pink through it, but Ernest would rather use sand than change to any other. It was the kind of soap his wife had always bought at Meeker's in Carthia. Sometimes, when there had been money for it, Jo had indulged in a finer brand, but just now every penny had to be watched and this large, unpretentious bar would go a long way. . . .

(Odd how a small thing like a bar of soap could so vividly bring back to you a person who had gone—and the very instant of the going. That December evening in 1929. The memory of being called home from the Hilyards', driving home through an iron twilight. Then, later in the same evening, when her mother had suddenly wanted to wash her face and hands and had sat up in her bed so straight and strong that Jo in a moment of glad surprise had been deceived. She had brought the basin, hot water, soap, and towel immediately—and later her comb. Her hair braided neatly across her head, her mother had leaned back upon her pillows and said, "It's the first of April. Ned Larkin will be coming down the road." Her eyes had never flickered again out of that staring shine. Ned Larkin had not returned that spring, nor any spring thereafter.)

When Jo had dressed she stood before the little closet her father had built into the room and looked at her clothing. A fall coat of cheap tweed, three dresses, brown, wine, and royal blue—she had made them all herself this year or last. Her summer clothes were folded away now in her cedar chest. Time—going! She took the wine-colored dress down from its hanger.

By outwitting the cunning flaw in the dresser mirror she could see that her hair was at its best, clean and bright. If it were not for her unruly bright color, she thought, she would somewhat resemble the dim painting of the Dutch girl which Laura Keefe owned. It had been Alec who first noted the similarity.

Jo heard the car entering the yard now and a glow swept over her. She could forget in a while spent with the Keefes that her life was going without any wild, sweet bloom. She could forget that in a few more months she would be twenty-five, and that still there was no one—not Lute Billings, not any of the young men she had come to know at the Keefes', at the community hall, or elsewhere—toward whom she could ever feel as she felt toward Royce Hilyard.

Outside, Laura was helping her brother from the car, giving him his crutches in her deft, casual way.

"Hello!" Jo called, going to meet them. "Isn't it a wonderful day? And I've just this minute got through with my house-cleaning!"

Laura put an arm about her and gave her a penetrating scrutiny. "You look blooming, my dear!"

"Not much like a person who'd just cleaned house," Alec observed.

"Well—I spent an hour on myself," Jo said.

Laura reached for a hamper in the car. "It's so lovely out I thought it would be fun to eat on the beach. I've brought the makings of a picnic."

"Swell! I'm just in the mood for a picnic. Come on into the house and I'll make the coffee."

While Laura chatted gaily about trifles Alec watched Jo moving with quick grace about the freshly scrubbed kitchen. A wistful smile lighted his deep-set, patient eyes.

"If I were a poet, Jo, I'd write some verses to you—just as you are. You invest a kitchen with a lyric joy."

"And call it 'Jobina on the Job,' eh?" She laughed.

"I'm doing my best to pay you a compliment, ingrate!" Alec complained.

She made a mock curtsy. "Thank you, kind sir. I had almost forgotten what a compliment was like."

"Where's your father, Jo?" Laura asked. "I was hoping he might be able to join us."

"He's helping Tom Matthews build a fishhouse down shore. He wants to get it done today because tomorrow he has to go over to Squaw Lake to do some repair work on a boat. Every little bit helps these days." She smiled cheerfully and went to the cupboard.

Alec and Laura exchanged glances.

"I suppose it does," Laura remarked in her brisk way. "I really wonder what people are going to do!"

Jo brought cups and saucers and piled them in Laura's hamper. Then she lifted the coffee pot from the stove. Her eyes were serene.

"It's going to be hard for a lot of people, I know. But we always seem to manage somehow around here. If the worst comes to the worst we can always live off the land. We've been doing that mostly, anyhow, for the past two years."

But later, when they were seated about the red-checked tablecloth under the birches on the shore, Laura said, "Jo—I haven't been able to get you out of my mind for days. Now, don't bristle up that way! You know what I've been thinking—ever since I talked to you last. I still insist this isn't the sort of life you ought to be living, my dear."

"And you know what I said when we talked about it last," Jo reminded her. "What a person would like to do, or how he'd like to live—"

"I've been thinking about that, too." Laura's small, intelligent eyes were bright with eager pleading as she laid her hand over Jo's. "I want you to come into town with us—for the winter, anyhow. You can come as our housekeeper if you must be stubborn about it. I really need someone to help me, besides Katie. But what I need most is your company. We'll pay you enough so that you can get a woman to do the work here for your father."

Jo looked down at the delicious chicken salad on her plate. She could not trust herself to meet Laura's gaze just now. It would be too easy to burst into distraught tears. These people—these well-bred, kindly people, who could not possibly have an inkling of the desperate stretching and straining she and her father were inured to in order that ten dollars could be made to do the work of fifty!

"You don't know my father," she said at last with difficulty. "Dad would be lost without me. Since Mother died—he's like a child. Don't think I'm ungrateful, Laura. I'd love—"

"Sure there's not something else in it?" Alec interrupted bluntly. "What about this chap—this Lute Billings who was here the last time we were out?"

Jo smiled uneasily. "No, I—why, I like Lute. I'm very fond of him. But marriage is another thing—if that's what you mean."

"Of course that's what I mean. The poor devil sat looking at you like a hungry dog last time we—"

"Now, stop teasing Jo, Alec," Laura put in. "I don't blame her for not marrying someone just because he happens to be available. It's certainly not in my place to make pronouncements on marriage, but a spinster sometimes has the advantage, I think, when it comes to making observations. When I

look at what some people are satisfied to call marriage—even in a small place like Carthia—"

Alec gave her a disapproving glance. "Don't start on that line, now. Before you know it you'll be developing into a nasty old maid who takes delight in the marital disasters of others."

With a sprightly toss of her head Laura remarked, "You can't accuse me of gossiping, Alec Keefe! I may take notes now and then, but I keep them to myself. There are times, I admit, when I can hardly resist telling what I know."

"Give me another cup of coffee, Jo," Alec said dryly, and handed her his cup. "This is likely to go on for at least an hour."

"We're going to gossip as much as we like," Jo told him. "I never hear a thing out here except that there's water in the swamp or that somebody's cow—"

"Don't pay the slightest attention to him, Jo," Laura advised. "He's annoyed because of what I told him about Tessie Hilyard on the way out."

"I knew it was coming round to that," Alec said. "Well, I did my best to head you off."

Bright motes were dancing before Jo's eyes. "Is there something about Teresa?" she managed to ask.

"I don't see why we shouldn't speak of it," Laura went on, "especially when everybody else is talking about it. Royce has been a friend of ours for years. And it makes me furious to see him acting like a blind fool just because he's in love with his wife."

"Caesar's wife—" Alec muttered.

"Royce is an idiot," Laura declared. "He's the only one in Carthia who doesn't know how she's been carrying on—especially with Neal Whitman."

For an instant Jo's heart seemed to stop. Teresa . . . that day of the Hilyard sale, strolling out of the barn with Ashbrooke . . . that day, only this last summer, when she had driven by on the shore road with Neal Whitman. Jo had been picking chokecherries in the brush just off the road where they could not see her. On Teresa's face was the bland and secret smile Jo remembered as long as ten years ago. . . .

Pain for Royce Hilyard twisted through her breast. "It probably doesn't mean a thing," she said unconcernedly. "Teresa was always rather vain. She

loves attention."

"She hasn't a brain in her head. You'd think she'd settle down a little, now that things are so difficult for Royce. Since his father lost most of his money, to say nothing of his land, Royce has been working like a slave. There's a rumor, too, that Wilbur Jaffey isn't having it any too easy. A lot of banks have failed—"

"It's dangerous to carry that rumor any farther," Alec reminded her.

"It's perfectly safe with Jo," Laura said. "All I'm saying is that Tessie Hilyard ought to take account of herself. If anything should happen to her father she'd have to live on what Royce makes out of his teaching. She must have her bread and butter—and lots of cake!—and she might at least be decent enough to play squarely."

"Well, she probably loves Royce—in her own way," Alec offered quietly.

"Love!" Laura indignantly lighted a cigarette.

Jo, watching her, wondered if Laura Keefe had ever known love of any sort other than the generous, selfless devotion she had given her brother.

"I still think it's an excellent institution," Alec observed.

"Too bad you don't smoke, Jo," Laura went on, smiling her rare, gamin smile. "It often keeps you from losing your temper."

Jo laughed. "I'll probably take it up some day—when I can afford it. Just now it's cheaper to lose my temper."

"And just as satisfying," said Alec.

Laura turned to Jo and laid her small dry hand over hers. "I'm not going to stop coaxing you to come and live with us, Jo. Of course, if you marry this brawny young farmer of yours—"

Jo shook her head, laughing. She looked out across the dancing blue and silver of the lake. Why should I not marry Luther Billings? she asked herself. Why not? Laura Keefe, sharp, bright, smart, kindly, but—sad, lonely, deep down. In five years, ten years—

"I can't imagine anything nicer than living with you, Laura," she said. "But just now—"

"I understand, my dear. I'm just being selfish. You have to be patient with an old maid like me. Come on, Alec—I'll gather up the things. We've

got to be going. This has been fun, anyhow. And next time you come to town, Jo, you must arrange it so you can have lunch with us—or dinner, eh?"

"Thanks, awfully! I promise. I'd love to."

A little later, when they were driving off, Jo stood looking down the gaudy autumn road after them. At least, she thought proudly with a lift of her head, Laura and Alec didn't know. Nobody knew. And that was something—to hide a pain so deeply that no one ever knew.

But it was time to start making supper. Her father would be coming in soon, hungry after his work down the shore. Fried potatoes, cold pike, cabbage salad. Lute Billings would probably be over later, and if Ernest was too tired for more than one game of cribbage, Lute would want to take her to the movies in Carthia or in Pilmer. That had been the way of it every Friday evening for more than a year. The days were passing in a shroud, bright or dark, but always toward evening—always toward Friday evening.

This thought possessed her when, later, they sat together on the little screened porch after supper. While she half listened, the men's talk had run along the usual channels—the new administration, the prices in crops and livestock, the outlook for the small game season. Jo listened and did not listen. She had heard it all before, only a week ago, on the last Friday night when Lute had been here.

On the pocket farms surrounding Fallen Star Lake the collapse of the nation's industrial and financial structure, and the slow groping back to recovery, had wrought no great difference, for where there had always been very little a bit less mattered not much this way or that. For this reason, although Lute became almost eloquent in his declaring that it was "up to the government now," Ernest Porte's response was apathetic. He had worked hard all day—and he was no longer a young man.

"Don't s'pose you feel like a game?" Lute asked finally. "We could play a hand out here; it ain't dark for a while yet."

"Well—" Ernest weighed the question as he always did. "Guess I'm good for about one game. You two'll want to go galavantin', anyhow, like as not. I'll get the cards and some fresh tobacco."

He stepped into the house and Lute grinned across at Jo. "I thought maybe we'd go over to Little Pine and dance for a while tonight," he said with a rapid intensity she had not seen in him for months. "I want to talk over a proposition that was put up to me this week. There's a nice chicken

farm for sale cheap. You folks could come in on it with me. I'd need a little help to run it. We could all live together and work—"

Ernest was coming back.

"I'd like to talk to you about it first," Lute added in a hurried whisper. "Will you come out?"

Jo looked straight into Lute's kind eyes, eyes that were smooth and innocent and opaque as certain light brown pebbles she used to gather along the shore. Her father stepped out from the doorway, looked at them, then bustled about, removing the potted geraniums from the table that stood against the porch screen.

An impulse born of a rebellious impatience at the tranced fixity of her life leaped violently within her to shout a consent to Lute's dogged but unspoken entreaties at last. What he had just suggested, she knew, was merely the old question in another form. If she went out with him tonight he would undoubtedly ask her to marry him. She did not shout, but with a swift, low recklessness that made Lute start in surprise she said, "Yes, I'll go!"

Lute's eyes took on a bright, eager expectancy. Jo, despite an inward shaking at a sense of having just done an irrevocable thing, got up.

"How would you like to try my dandelion wine?" she asked suddenly. "I think it's just about ready now."

"Trot it out, even if it kills us!" Ernest said with a watery, quick twinkle. "Eh, Lute?"

"Yeah, I feel like celebratin'!" Lute replied, and smiled at Jo.

She felt suddenly no longer in harsh control of things. It was rather as if she were being rushed blindly forward into an inevitable oblivion. Her mother, her father, Ned Larkin—and now herself, Lute Billings and . . . This, then, was what from the first had been in store.

But while she was in the kitchen pouring the sparkling cool wine into glasses, with hands that trembled like brown leaves, she heard a car enter the driveway and halt before the house. Glancing from the window, she saw Seth Hornblow coming up the path, his leathery face haggard and ash-colored.

Jo hurried to the front door again. Seth had come up to the porch and stood now as if he were having trouble getting his clenched jaws apart so that he could speak. Jo's heart contracted with a premonitory pang.

“Len Hilyard’s been killed!” he burst out finally in a shaking voice.

Lute Billings dropped his cards and stared at Seth. Ernest rose halfway out of his chair.

“Killed?” he echoed in shrill incredulity. “What’re you sayin’?”

Seth, breathing hard, steadied himself against the door frame with one knotted hand.

“He was hit in the head by a flyin’ rock in that field he’s been clearin’ east o’ the house. I was workin’ with him when it happened. I brought him in an’ called Royce an’ he came out with the doctor. But Len never came to.”

“Did you want us?” Ernest asked. “Is there anything we can do—”

“I come over to get Jo. Hedvig is takin’ on pretty bad, an’ Royce thought Jo could do something.”

Jo sank into a chair, struggling against a sick dizziness.

“Could you come right away?” Seth asked.

“Yes—yes, of course, Seth,” she stammered. “Just—wait a minute.” She pressed her fingers against her eyes.

She heard her father and Lute Billings exclaiming about Len Hilyard, aghast with consternation, Seth Hornblow responding distractedly to their questions. But their words seemed to be without meaning. She got up sharply and went inside for her coat.

When she returned her father was staring dejectedly at the floor, his hands hanging limp between his knees. “Len Hilyard,” he said, almost under his breath, and again, “Len Hilyard!”

Lute got up from his chair. “Do you want me to go with you, Jo?” he asked.

“No. I’ll go along with Seth. I’ll be back as soon as I can.”

Seth Hornblow said almost nothing on the way to Sky Valley. And Jo was glad of that.

There was something infinitely lonely about the white Hilyard house standing against the yellowing autumn poplars in the yellow, fading day. Len Hilyard had gone forever from the land he loved.

“They took him into town,” Seth told her as he brought the car to the back of the house. “Doc Murdoch had the undertaker come out. They don’t waste much time—after a man goes.”

Jo tried to be matter-of-fact. “I don’t suppose you’ve had supper, Seth?”

“Haven’t thought about it.”

They were entering the house now and Jo could hear, from the room off the kitchen, Hedvig’s long-drawn sobs.

“Mebbe if you just go in an’ knock on the door, quiet sort of, she’ll listen to you. She’s goin’ to make herself sick in there, for sure.”

“I’ll fix something to eat,” Jo said briskly. “She’ll come out for a cup of tea, I think.”

“Mebbe. I’ll stir up the fire an’ you just mosey round an’ cook up anything you find.”

In a few minutes the kitchen was full of determined activity. While she beat eggs into an earthen bowl Jo listened alertly for some change in the sounds coming from Hedvig’s room. The sobbing had already grown muffled. Presently the bedroom door opened, and Jo looked up from the stove where she was scalding the teapot and saw Hedvig standing there, wringing her hands, her rosy face mottled and tear-streaked.

“Hello, Hedvig,” Jo said softly. “I’m getting a bite of supper ready for Seth. Come on and have a cup of tea with us.”

“Ya—but *he* von’t be here to have it vit’ us—never vill he be here again!” Hedvig’s voice was so sepulchral that Jo had a fleeting, hysterical desire to laugh. The woman’s mouth, a pathetic little fold of flesh, quivered childishly.

Jo went to her and put her firmly down into a chair beside the kitchen table. “We won’t think of that now, Hedvig,” she said gently, and took the work-worn hands into her own.

What right had anyone to belittle Hedvig’s heartbreak? It was not altogether fantastic to suppose that even at her age—and Hedvig must be nearing fifty—the years of her slavish devotion to Len Hilyard had created within her a love for him as green and young as any she might have experienced in her denied youth.

Hedvig wiped her face shakily on her damp apron. “It vass nice of you to kom over, anyhow,” she said, straightening angrily. “Ya—I act up so!”

“I’ll pour you a cup of tea,” Jo said, and went back to the stove.

A little later, when Hedvig, spent from her storm of grief, was sleeping soundly, Jo hurriedly washed the few dishes and walked down to the beach to wait for Seth to take her home after his chores were done.

From the Hilyard shore the September twilight was clear and lonely, citron merging into blue-green beyond the black spines of the islands. It was no more than an hour since she had left home and yet, because of that chilling while in the Hilyard house, it seemed infinitely long. She wondered now with a sort of lassitude whether Lute Billings would still be at home waiting for her, and how she would revive herself to go out with him as she had promised.

An automobile came through the elm avenue on the hill above. That would probably be Royce or Ashbrooke coming back. Her only feeling now was one of vexation that Seth Hornblow had not got her away before their return. She could not talk to either of them just yet.

But when Royce called to her from the top of the slope, where the path ended in birches, she walked slowly up to him, wondering with quickened heartbeat what she should say to him, what manner of condolence to offer.

But his face was set in a cold, bleak order that rejected, more than words might have done, any expression of sympathy. He took her hand and looked down at her.

“Thank you for your help, Jo. Seth told me you were here. He’s still busy and I have nothing to do just now. I’ll run you home.” His tightening mouth made creases in his cheeks. “Shall we go?”

The icy formality of his question that was meant to hide and yet did more to reveal his anguish brought stinging tears to Jo’s eyes. She turned aside quickly.

“Yes—I’m ready.”

Without a word he followed her up the path to the driveway where the car stood.

The road led west and north through a twilight washed to violet and budded with the first pale stars. For the first half mile, before it dipped into the Owl Country, it passed over notched hills where clumps of scrub oak burned with the sullen red of blood, and where occasionally a tall pine, like a lonely sentinel, stood on a ragged crest. All this was wasteland now, spectral as an abandoned world; it was the ruthless swath cut by the forest

spoilers who had come before old Ashbrooke Hilyard had purchased the tract, and whose flagrant neglect had brought disastrous fires to take the trees that had been left standing. The region extended far to the west, beyond the limits of the Hilyard acreage. It was a tomb open to the winds, and its epitaph, written in the charred stumps that rose from the scrub oak, was a somber rebuke to man.

Jo was wondering desolately if Royce was not going to utter a single word when all at once he said between his teeth, “This is the stretch that used to make him curse the lumber hogs. It was like this when he first came here and it has scarcely changed. It will never be good for anything but sheep pasture.”

Jo felt she must say something, anything, to keep that awful silence from returning. “He talked about that once when he drove me home. But it gives the place a wild sort of beauty, especially at this time of year.”

Royce muttered something under his breath and drew the car sharply to the side of the road. He threw his arms about the wheel, buried his head in them, and sat brokenly forward. It was not the first time Jo had seen a man weep. There had been Tom Matthews and her own father. But this was different. She held herself rigid. It was the thing Royce must do, she told herself. But it was dreadful to be so close to him, to feel all through her own blood the spasms of grief that rocked his body, and yet not dare to lay her hand upon his shoulder or smooth the back of his dark head as she might a brokenhearted little boy’s.

And yet, suddenly now, she did dare. A feeling of strength and selflessness came upon her. She reached forward and closed her cool, firm fingers about his hot hand.

“Oh, Royce—if I could only help you bear it! I’ve known what it is. But it will pass. Try to think that he was doing what he wanted to do—right up to the last. He used to tell me he wanted to clear the stone field. I think there was something rather grand about that.” Her voice fell to a whisper. “He was fine—and strong, always—and undefeated.”

“Undefeated!” he muttered. “Yes—that’s the word, Jo.” He stared out at the road, his mouth a straight, etched line. “It’s the damned loneliness you feel—aloneness, rather! I didn’t know it would be like this.”

“That will pass, too,” Jo said.

She wondered about Teresa. Why had she not come out to the farm with Royce? Laura Keefe’s remarks about her this afternoon returned with cold

emphasis. But she dared not think about that just now.

"I had to telephone Mother," Royce said after a moment. "It was a little too much for her—coming like this. But Dorothy was fine. I was surprised, really. They're leaving Chicago tonight. I don't know what to do about Tess. This is going to be terrible news for her. I'll have to telephone her tonight. I just didn't have the heart to do it when I was in town. She was so devoted to Dad."

"She isn't in town?"

"She's gone to spend the week-end with a school friend in Duluth. She left this morning."

He started the car again and for the remainder of the way, through the shadowed Owl Country and beyond to the Portes' gate, they rode together in silence.

"I'll not drive in, Jo, if you don't mind," he said. "I don't feel like talking to anybody just now. Thanks—thanks for everything." He opened the door for her, and when she had stepped down he stretched out his hand and took hers in a brief, strong clasp.

She turned quickly away and walked through the darkened lane toward the house. One thought was in her mind—she could not keep her promise to Lute Billings tonight.

The men had gone in from the porch and sat talking in the lamplight when Jo entered. Their faces were still grave from the shock of Seth Hornblow's news. Lute got up and looked at her questioningly, diffidently. An unreasoning acrimony rose within her all at once at his hesitant meekness. But very quietly she took off her coat and hat and carried them to her room.

"You're back early," her father said. "We didn't expect you for a while yet."

"There was nothing left for me to do," Jo replied.

"No, there isn't much anybody can do, I s'pose. Did they take Len away?" he asked delicately. "Seth said—"

"Yes—all that had been done."

The finality of those words released within her a sudden nervous reaction which she could not control. She smoothed back her hair and with a

blind glance at Lute said, “I think I’ll go and lie down. I can’t go anywhere tonight, Lute—”

“No—sure! You looked tired out, Jo. You better go to bed. It must’ve been pretty tough for you, goin’ over there like that.” He halted awkwardly, then added, “I’ll drop in some night again pretty soon. Maybe I’ll get around this way for a while on Sunday.”

Jo went into her room and closed the door behind her.

For hours she lay staring hot-eyed into the darkness with no shaped thought or feeling. What did it matter that old Ashbrooke Hilyard had dreamed and builded in the hope that generations coming after him might find joy in what he had done? Or that Len Hilyard had set his heart upon clearing the stone field so that it might yield the fruits of harvests yet to be? Or that she herself had borne within her a secret love for Royce Hilyard down through the years of her growing? Designs are long in the making and are shattered in an instant. Only the seasons are inexorable—and change alone eternal.

And yet, against that obscure pattern of the years, one thought stood out, clear and serene. She would not marry Lute Billings.

Phineas Baggott had not yet heard of Leonard Hilyard’s death when Jo, the next morning, brought him the pail of milk she had to spare from the last two milkings. He made no comment when she told him, but gave her a long, piercing look from beneath the shag of his brows.

“Come with me,” he said at last. “There is something that must be done.”

She followed him to the chopping block near the wood pile. The ax, as he pulled it out of the block, winked sharp and malevolently purposeful in the sun. It was only a few steps to the clump of birches—the three standing simple and white with their yellowing flakes of leaves peaceful upon the bright air, the fourth a weathered, rugged stump long since.

Tears of helpless indignation sprang to Jo’s eyes as the ax bit clean and swift into the trunk of the largest tree. The birch creaked, swayed, and yet stood.

“Would you have cut down the first one if the wind hadn’t got it before you?” Jo demanded furiously.

"But the wind *did*," he said. "There was dry rot in the heart of that one. This one has already lived longer than birches do as a rule. Leonard Hilyard went in violence."

He smiled and raised the ax again. The smell of the cleft trunk sprang acridly upon the air. The tree loitered to the ground, as if clinging until the very last instant to the air it had known.

"What—" Jo asked, choking—"what about the other two?"

Almost sadly Phineas Baggott turned to Jo. "There is time yet for them. There's a conspiracy of the seasons against the Hilyards."

With the ax over his shoulder he walked away from her, up the slope to the house, entered, and closed the door.

3

All that had been a year ago. Jo pressed her fingers against her eyes, shook her head impatiently and got to her feet. What she had been doing today she had done on that day twelve months ago. She carried the mop and pail downstairs. She hung the mop in its place and dumped the water in the back yard. Nig, the affable mongrel pup she had got from the Matthewses, came tumbling about her legs. She picked the soft, black, wriggling creature up in her arms and hugged him in blank abstraction.

"Just a year ago today, Nig," she said aloud.

The dog's tongue flicked happily at her chin.

The season was waiting. Phineas Baggott and his two remaining birches were waiting. She, Jo Porte—now in her twenty-sixth year—was waiting. Low over the lake a great blue heron sailed by, crest flat, legs trailing.

"It's crazy to think things like this," she told herself severely. "It's only because—"

The month flowed by, and although she was busy preparing her flower and vegetable patches against the coming of winter, and canning what was left of the garden truck after the drought, the tranced feeling never quite left her.

It was just after dawn of the first day of the hunting season, when a milk-blue fog was wreathing in from the lake, that Neal Whitman was

accidentally shot to death by Royce Hilyard's gun. From the wild rice in the slag-colored water the flock of blue-bills rose with a clangor of alarm and printed their dark and trailing pattern on the southern sky.

Chapter Two

1

Even the long-lying snows, even the powerful rains of late April, could not blacken to proper richness this land of the bar sinister, this baseborn offspring of the Iron Range to the north, Royce meditated with wry satisfaction. But as he swayed to the motion of the sulky plow behind the grays he reflected that the thought was meager, unworthy of the dark feeling from which it sprang.

He glanced out over the field with moody eyes; it was the richest part of the land his father had left to him and Ashbrooke. By the grace of God a crop of oats would rise from it in due time, a crop that any farmer in the southern reaches of the state might laugh at. It had one feature, however, for which he could bless it negatively. It was possible to traverse its length and breadth without beholding that awesome and biblical expanse which had snapped his father's life—that gaunt region which Jo Porte had called the Stone Field. The great fans of white pine hid it from view.

As the horses strained up the slope toward a sky loosely cloud-tattered from rain that had gone on eastward, Royce thought about the field he could not see. One of these days he would have to take up the clearing of that field where his father had left off seven months ago; one of these days he would be forced to conquer his horror of it and begin turning it to the practical use Len had designed for it. For some reason it seemed that life had to go on. And to sustain life he would be obliged to convert to productivity those vicious, hummocky acres. The dreary irony of it gave him a feeling of vast fatigue.

The late sky was clearing to a cool shell color and the wind was fresh. It would be sunny tomorrow. He caught himself thinking of it, as if it were important, and laughed with loud bitterness. Back into the weather and the land—he whose spacious plans for himself had been so brilliant! Only last September, at the opening of the school year, he had thought—just a little

longer at this dreary grind, and I'll have saved enough to take Tessie with me to New York, where people are doing what I want to do!

While he turned the grays again to plow the last furrow on the home stretch, he stared at Seth Hornblow's dog loping ahead and barking back his pride in the day's work. Tip no doubt wondered why, after years of his master's supremacy in these fields, the plow seat should be occupied now by another. The thought filled him with bleak laughter. Even here he was not wanted.

He approached the barns from the south and reflected indifferently upon how dingy the buildings had become. But the house was worse. The paint was almost putty-colored, scaling, and there were unsightly gaps in the stonework below. There had been no money for improvements. Royce shrugged. There was no emotion left in him to provide regret for so superficial a thing as the appearance of the house in which he had been born. But there did rise in him a flicker of grim humor at the thought of what his mother's feeling had been when she saw it last September at Len's funeral.

When he drew into the yard beside the watering trough, the bare and flaming disk of the sun was dropping behind the frailly green elms to the west of the house. He unhitched the grays and stroked their humid flanks while they drank deeply, but his eyes were absently upon that remnant of a spring day. Below the north slope, the lake was gull-gray under the wind. Out there where the marshy shore edged the Owl Country, wild ducks were building their nests among the swamp's brittle reeds. There was something almost pleasurable in the sharp pang that smote him now as his eyes rested for a moment on the shadowed cove. He had come to believe that he was far beyond feeling anything at all after that certain October dawn and the overwhelming events that had followed it with the endless ferocity of a nightmare.

2

To this day he could not tell clearly what had happened that morning among the reeds. He had done his best to remember and to tell it, but all his efforts had only made his confusion the more baffling. They had gone out at daybreak, he and Neal Whitman, and had taken the old duck punt westward along the outer edge of the marsh. When they were opposite the swamp they pushed their way into hiding and waited. It was cold, with a white fog

drifting along the surface of the lake, an uneasy clamor filling the reeds, and above them the hurried beat of wild fowl on the wing.

That much, at least, Royce could remember. He could remember, too, sitting in one end of the boat, his gun across his knees, and looking at Neal Whitman who had got to his knees, gun in hand, ready for the flight. A quick rush came out of the fog behind them, a rush like a rising wind, and Royce turned quickly to meet it. The sudden crash of a gun and the startled upward beating of wings among the reeds seemed to have no meaning for an instant. He remembered seeing Neal Whitman twist sidewise and fall halfway over the edge of the boat as if in his excitement he had lost his balance. He had laughed at Neal and reached forward to help him back into his seat. After that Royce could recall nothing. He must have gone back to the house and telephoned to John Murdoch. He was there, at any rate, and alone when the old doctor arrived with another man from Carthia. He could think back now and recall his own surprise at seeing Tim Bates, the county sheriff, get out of the car with Murdoch.

The rest was clear enough—clear as the flaming October sun that leaped, blood-red and frightening, out of the east as they drove back to Carthia; clear as the shrill voice of Teresa, accusing him of deliberately taking the life of his best friend because . . . "because he loved me—and because I loved him—and you knew it. . . ."

No, Royce had not known. But others had known, it seemed—all the others who knew him—even his own brother, Ashbrooke. They had known, but they hadn't told him. He hadn't known.

That was what he couldn't seem to make them understand—those catechizing fools who hugged their suspicions and did their best to make him admit what wasn't true. Well, they had believed him at last. *He hadn't known!*

Old Gilpey, the principal of the academy, had not been interested in that, however. He believed what Royce told him—he had always believed him, without hesitation, in everything. But there were other considerations. The morale of the school, for example. Royce had thought of that, too, and had offered his resignation. He had hoped that Gilpey might be strong enough to hold out, might refuse to let him go. But Gilpey had regretted deeply—offered to recommend highly—and accepted the resignation immediately.

After that no one had said anything. Even Wilbur Jaffey had remained silent. But Royce had thought nothing of that. Jaffey had finally taken defeat himself when the bank had closed the first week in November. On the verge

of nervous collapse, he had taken Mrs. Jaffey and Teresa to California for the winter.

And Royce had gone back to Sky Valley. . . .

3

The voice of old Seth Hornblow came to him from the milk yard beside the barn and suddenly a ripple of obscure fear passed over him, palpable as a cool veering of the wind. For a few seconds it had not been himself who stood there gazing down toward the lake, but someone else who had occupied for a limitless time the six-foot space of his body. He passed his hand over his eyes, then laughed shortly. From sunup to sundown was a little too much evidently, just yet. But he'd get used to that, too, as he had got used to many things during the past months.

Leaving his horses for Seth to look after, he turned toward the house. In the kitchen he hung up his hat and his leather jacket and washed perfunctorily at the sink. The range fire was out, the room cheerless and drab and none too clean. Since Hedvig's departure just after Christmas, they had given little attention to housekeeping, and the kitchen had suffered most of all from the neglect. Royce shrugged as his eyes took in the litter of greasy pots and pans on the table; then he set mechanically about laying a fire in the stove.

Ashbrooke, he supposed, would be eating his dinner in town. It was astonishing how much "business" Ashbrooke had to attend to in town, especially now that spring planting had begun. What he did or where he went were matters of indifference to Royce—as everything was that touched his external life now. He inhabited a sealed, dark chamber in which he was coldly secure from any concern with the material world.

Seth Hornblow came in, washed up, and flattened his thinning hair to his scalp.

"Everything's ready, Seth," Royce announced. "If you'll set the table now we'll sit down. No sense in waiting for Ash. He'll have eaten in town, anyhow."

Seth came and stood beside Royce, an expression of pity softening his weathered face.

"Kinda tired tonight, ain't you?"

"Just a little. But I'll get over that. I'm a bit soft yet."

"It don't seem right," Seth floundered, "—you doin' this, I mean. I was watchin' you out there today. You'll get used to the work, I guess, when you've had a few weeks of it. But—but this kind o' stuff—cookin' an' all that. It'll get you down after a while if you ain't careful."

Royce smiled down at the bandy-legged little man. "Nothing in God's world will do that, Seth. I've been at absolute zero for weeks."

Seth grinned uncomfortably and began setting the table.

The meal over and the dishes washed, Royce went upstairs and built a fire in the old tower room. Thank Heaven the place had somehow withstood the onslaught of the years. Len Hilyard had restored its original homely comfort a few weeks after Alda had left. The modern pieces with which she had furnished the room had been taken out and old Ashbrooke's couch and chairs put back where they belonged.

Royce threw himself upon the couch and watched the flames grow in the fireplace. He was half asleep when Ashbrooke, with a show of crisp energy that wearied Royce, bounded into the room and flung himself down in the big chair facing the fire.

"The farmer takes a rest," he sang, and struck a match for his cigarette.

"I was almost asleep," Royce told him drowsily.

Ashbrooke flicked his match into the fire. "You're making too much of this job. I don't see the idea, myself. Why don't you throw it up and get out?"

"Out where?"

"Anywhere! Go away where no one ever heard of you and start in again. This thing isn't going to follow you around the world. And the depression isn't going to last forever. You ought to be getting ready to do something when the tide starts coming in again. There'll be more jobs and more money than you've ever seen. I wouldn't be surprised if the academy sent for you—once you showed them your dust. Not that you'd ever come back, of course. That old ass, Gilpey!"

Royce closed his eyes again. He had been over that ground too often in his own soul to be stirred now by any indignation Ashbrooke might show. Of course, Gilpey had known best. There was no place in an academy for a

man whose private life had been split open like a ripe pomegranate in a grocery store window so that the public might see how red and juicy it was.

"What did you do in town today?" He didn't want to know, really. He didn't care what Ashbrooke had done. But he couldn't talk about Gilpey.

"I had lunch with old man Fredericks. Spent the afternoon with him and Dooley. Real estate isn't exactly booming these days, but they look for an increased turnover this summer. They've had inquiries for summer places—rental stuff, mostly. But they've made a few sales, too, and things are beginning to look up. They may take me on in a couple of weeks if things improve."

"Good. You'll like that?"

"Well, there's no sense in either of us staying on here. It would be something in the way of a start, anyhow. By the way, we had another talk today about that shore property. They're still interested."

"Have they come up on their last offer?"

"I have a feeling that Dooley would raise the ante if old Fredericks didn't hold him down. The old man made most of his money buying good lake-shore stuff in hard times and holding it for the demand. He knows we need money and that twenty dollars an acre ought to look good to us right now. I told him politely to go to the devil. In another year we'll be able to sell shore lots at ten dollars a foot if we want to. What do you think?"

Royce stirred reluctantly. "Maybe. Count me out of the picture, anyhow, We'll have taxes to meet again in the fall, of course. If we have to sacrifice some of the shore stuff to pay them—we'll have to do it, that's all. I'll let you decide. There's one thing about selling for summer home sites—the timber will be saved. It isn't as if we were selling to a lumber company. That counts for me. Dad gave his life, when you think of it, to keep those trees standing. He could have sold the timber—and lived comfortably for years. But he inherited an obligation along with the estate. Take the timber off and in three years there wouldn't be enough good top soil left around the lake to grow pigweed."

Ashbrooke was silent for a moment. "The rents would almost pay the taxes—*if* the rents were paid. But I've been going through Dad's old ledgers. Some of the rents are in arrears three years."

Royce nodded heavily. He made an effort to drag up inside himself at least a pretense of interest, but it was of no use. He simply did not care. Tonight, especially.

"Yes, I suppose so."

Upon Ashbrooke's face appeared a closed and uncommunicative look, a secret smile of derision. If Royce would only turn his thoughts a little more to the difficulties they were facing and a little less to the fantastic events of the past six months, it would be better for them both. He had no wits left for practical considerations. Royce was rather unpredictable—all dreamers were, Ashbrooke reflected with contempt. He had inherited his father's sentimental attitude toward many things which should be handled with cool deliberateness and with an eye to one's own advantage.

"Dad got sort of queer toward the last," Ashbrooke said finally. "He went around among these people as if he—well, he got altogether too clubby with them in my humble opinion. They were putting it all over him and he didn't seem to care. He actually seemed to like it. There's no sense in nursing people along year after year. They begin to look for it. And I don't see anyone nursing us along."

"No, I suppose not." Royce had scarcely listened to what his brother was saying. He had been overcome again by that sense of spiritual annihilation in which his body remained grotesquely, indecently alive. He wanted only one thing now. Tired as he was, he wanted to get out of the house and walk until he sank down somewhere of sheer exhaustion. He added, out of a dim motive of fairness to Ashbrooke, "You'll just have to handle this business the best way you know how. I'm not up to it—not yet, anyhow. I'll give you power of attorney and you can do what you like about it. I'll stick around here until fall and carry as much of the heavy work as I can. It'll keep me sane, anyhow. In the meantime, maybe the scandal"—he gave an ironical inflection to the word—"will have died down and some half-witted school board may give me a job."

Ashbrooke was frankly bored. For the life of him he could not see why Royce should always come back to a misfortune six months old—one, moreover, in which he had been absolved of guilt and in which he had incidentally rid himself of that provocative and loose little slut, Tessie! In some respects Royce had never grown up.

"You'd better go to bed," he suggested abruptly. "I'll turn out and finish up that field for you tomorrow. You can take it easy for a day."

Royce was not listening. He had got up from the couch and gone to stand before the window. The thinnest new moon he had ever seen made a silver trace in the western sky.

4

It became easier, Royce discovered, as the weeks went by. A day in the fields no longer left him jaded and spent, but filled him rather with a rich tranquillity. Peace and a kind of contentment, the serenity of the humble, had come to him at last.

On a raw, gusty evening in mid-May he drove his team down a grassy trail that led to the county road. His wagon was loaded with pine that Seth Hornblow had cut into cordwood lengths during the winter and put in piles to dry. Where the trail met Baggott's road, the grays shied and pricked their ears. Royce drew on the reins and looked ahead. Phineas Baggott was laboring up the slope, his shoulders bent beneath a bulging brown sack.

"Hello!" Royce called as soon as the old man had come to the top of the ridge.

Baggott swung his heavy sack to the ground and looked up. "You have a load there," he said, and rubbed his eyes with the back of a gnarled hand.

Royce laughed. "I was thinking the same about you, Mr. Baggott."

"Fish for the pack," Phineas said. "I've been on the lake since morning."

"There ought to be a supper for them in that."

The old man came and stood beside the wagon, leering up at Royce. "You haven't seen the new litter? Five beauties! They'll be six weeks old tomorrow. That makes four generations that have come down from Juno—though I'll never see her like again. But they're like her, too. Nature does well enough if you leave her alone, eh?"

He turned slowly and started away, then paused. For a moment he looked at Royce as if he were weighing something very carefully in his mind.

When he spoke finally his voice was almost inaudible. "I see that little Matthews girl is around again."

Royce started. It was small wonder, he thought, if the old fellow's mind was beginning to weaken at last. His long years of solitude—

"Yes?" he said uneasily, and drew the reins together in his fingers.

But a sharp glance darted from beneath Phineas Baggott's brows. "Don't sit there as if you didn't know what I'm talking about, young fellow! I mean

her we found in the snow. Goldy, they called her. She's been around again. Used to come alone at first, but there was another with her last time."

He shook his head and walked away, muttering softly under his breath. In the road he stood for a moment and looked back at Royce, then swung the heavy sack up to his shoulders and staggered off.

"What brought you home so early?" Royce asked Ashbrooke, who came to meet him as he drove into the yard.

Ashbrooke grinned. "Just got a yen for a little home cooking. Come on into the house and let Seth look after the load."

Seth was already coming from the barn. Royce followed Ashbrooke toward the house.

"We'll have to do something about old man Baggott," he said. "I met him just now as I was coming out of the bush back there. If he isn't crazy I am."

"I think you're both a little touched," Ashbrooke laughed. "The only difference is that he's been daffy for years—and he's quite harmless."

He was in high spirits, Royce thought to himself. "You must have had a good day—" He checked himself and halted suddenly, his eyes on the window at the back of the kitchen. "Who's in the house?"

"That's the new cook," Ashbrooke said, his face beaming. "Come in and meet her."

But Royce refused to move. He thought at once of Teresa—then of Jo Porte.

"Just a minute, Ash." He was very serious. "What's the idea? Who's in there?"

Before Ashbrooke could reply, the door opened and a tall angular figure appeared against the warm light in the background.

"My God—Milledge!" Royce exclaimed, and in a moment had her in his arms.

Ashbrooke pushed past them into the kitchen. "Come on out, Mother!" he called, and Royce looked over Milledge's shoulder to see his mother standing in the living-room doorway.

"Oh, my poor boy—my poor—"

Sentimental tears choked her as Royce threw his arms about her plump shoulders and kissed her.

A hundred questions had to be answered at once. Yes, they had telegraphed to say they were coming. That had been yesterday, and Ashbrooke had kept it a secret—except from old Seth Hornblow. That was why Royce had been sent to haul wood early in the afternoon. No, they wouldn't be able to stay more than two or three days. Dorothy and Clifford had been very nice about it and they would have to get back at once. It was Dorothy who had insisted on Milledge's taking a vacation.

But a table had been set before the fireplace in the living room and they must eat. They had brought things from town and Milledge had prepared a feast. She had done more than that, apparently. The place had been scrubbed and cleaned and polished until the kitchen and the living room looked like new. How had they ever *existed* in such a clutter of pots and pans, and corners filled with unbelievable rubbish? It was time someone stepped in!

Not until the next evening, however, did Royce discover the real reason for his mother's unheralded visit. Milledge had spent the day cleaning house and had asked Ashbrooke to take her over to see Jo Porte after dinner. Royce and his mother were alone together in the tower room before a blazing fire.

"Too bad you have to go back so soon," Royce said as he sprawled in the big chair. "It's like old times, this."

"You don't deserve a visit," his mother replied, leaning toward him and smoothing his hair back with a soft hand. "I shouldn't have come at all if I hadn't been so worried about you."

Royce laughed. "Worried about me?" He wondered blankly if his voice sounded as wooden to his mother as it did to himself.

"You never wrote me a word about that horrible affair last October. If Ashbrooke hadn't written me—"

"How could I write? I didn't want to talk to anyone about it." He set his teeth and stared into the fire without a flicker of expression. "I don't think it would do either of us any good to talk about it, even now."

Alda Hilyard sighed and gave Royce's hand a cozy little pat. "We shan't talk about it, dear. I don't want to hurt you. But—why didn't you come to us—to *me*—when you were in such trouble? It might have helped, and Clifford—"

"I wasn't fit company for anyone at the time. I'm not now, for that matter. You'd discover that if you stayed around for a while."

Without looking at her Royce knew that his mother was fumbling for her ridiculous square of handkerchief.

"I am still—your mother, Royce. You used to come to me with all your troubles."

For a brief moment Royce felt a twinge of compassion. But the moment passed quickly.

"You forget, Mother, that we're supposed to have grown up since then. I confess I haven't done a very good job of it, but we can't spend our lives running to Mother."

"I know, dear. I suppose I expect too much from my children. But—especially since poor Father passed on—I've been terribly alone in the world. If it hadn't been for Dorothy and Clifford—You are all I have left—you and Ashbrooke and Dorothy. If I can't be of some help to you there isn't much left to live for. A mother's love for her children—"

"Please, Mother!" Royce pleaded. "There's no question of love in it. We take all that for granted. But there are some things we'd rather not discuss with anyone. It couldn't possibly have helped—in any way—if I had gone to you last fall when I was in that mess. It was something that just could not be helped. The sooner we forget about it the better."

"You're quite right, dear. It's all in the past now. I'm more worried about your future. Have you decided yet what you are going to do?"

"I haven't thought much about it. I'll stay on here through the summer. After that I may—"

"Have you thought about Teresa?"

"Well—naturally. You can't help thinking."

"She has written to Dorothy—and to me—lovely letters, Royce."

He could feel swift heat leap into his face; then his features hardened to a stony mask.

"There's no law against that," he said.

"She admits it was all her fault. I know how it must have hurt you, dear, but she was young and—and very foolish, of course. Perhaps I should feel bitter because of what she has done to you. I *have* felt bitter. I have hated

her. But I have tried to be generous, too. Teresa has learned a terrible lesson. And she loves you, Royce—in spite of everything that has happened between you. I think she loves you more, perhaps, because of—"

"For God's sake, Mother!" Royce exploded. "I don't want to talk about her. I don't want to hear about her. What she thinks of me doesn't matter—in the least. I don't want to see her again—and I'd rather not hear about her. If that's what brought you here—"

"Royce, dear—please don't be unfair. I came here because I felt I had to see you. You know that. It was only—I felt I might be able to save you and Teresa from ruining your lives. It isn't too late yet. Dorothy thought—"

"Mother!" he interrupted her. "Anything that Dorothy may think—or you, either—has no bearing on it. So far as I am concerned Tessie doesn't exist. It has taken me a whole winter to come to that point, but there's nothing you or Dorothy or anyone else can do about it now. Please understand me. After she left she approached me through Stanley for help. Stanley used to be Wilbur Jaffey's legal adviser. He was very decent about it, and I did everything I could at the time. I sold the house in Carthia and all the furniture, except the two or three pieces I brought with me out here, and had Stanley turn over the proceeds to Tessie. I had intended to do so anyhow. But that closed the deal so far as I had any part in it. She seemed satisfied enough then. She started proceedings for her divorce at once—and I entered no protest—and that, it seems to me, closed her end of the deal. It was all quite simple, really. The point is—I want to keep it simple. It will only complicate things for you and Dorothy to try patching it up now. There's nothing left to patch up. From now on, it will be as if we had never known each other."

Alda Hilyard's sigh was deep and prolonged. She folded her hands in her lap and stared into the fire.

"There's a little left of that sherry you brought out, Mother," Royce suggested.

"Well—a small glass, perhaps," she conceded. "It might do me good. I feel so—so useless."

Chapter Three

1

Another Toufang was going to be married. This time it was Brade's eighteen-year-old granddaughter, Tillie. A young farmer from south of Carthia had been going around with Tillie all summer and the wedding had been set for some time in September. Brade had boasted that the girl was doing very well by herself, even if the young couple would have to live in the same house with the boy's father and mother. In a few years they would have the farm to themselves.

"Hard times don't seem to stop 'em fallin' in love," old Mrs. Vandermeyer said with a dry chuckle.

It was now late August and the Vandermeyers were giving a "shower" for Tillie Toufang. It was threshing time, too, and the men of the district had come to help Charlie Vandermeyer in the first bee of the season. The old lady had managed to combine the two occasions and make one grand party of it, with all the neighbors and their wives there to enjoy it.

The harvest meals had grown plainer during these lean years, but no less fatiguing for the women who had the toil of making them. But the center of all the activity in the kitchen was old Mrs. Vandermeyer, who looked bright as a robin, for all her years, and could still do a day's work with the best of them.

"Indeed, it'd be a pity if good beddin' had to wait on good eatin'," she added with a twinkle.

"It might be better if it did, just the same," Mrs. Dibney said. "There's too much of this running to get married with your eyes shut these days. Not but what—"

"Well, I've seen all kinds in my day," the old lady put in, "and I've noticed that it ain't the poor ones that's gettin' the divorces."

They all knew what she was referring to, of course. News had spread during the summer that Teresa Hilyard had won her divorce. Only a moment ago Jo had brought a basket full of sweet corn from the Vandermeyer garden and had looked out to where the men were at work with the threshing rig beside the barn. For a breathless instant she had seen Royce Hilyard silhouetted darkly against the gilded cascade of chaff thrown from the separator spout, a sharp flame of sunlight leaping through the chaff, wild and magnificent.

"It's a pity, though, when the innocent have to suffer with the guilty," Dora Vandermeyer said. "That Teresa—out in California, looking round for a rich husband, like as not—and Royce here, living like a hermit."

Mrs. Matthews spoke for the first time. "He'll be ready to take old Baggott's place when he goes."

Jo said nothing, not trusting herself to speak. She began hurriedly to pull the husks from the ears of corn and gave all her mind to removing each brown filament from between the rows of plump kernels.

She had seen very little of Royce during the past few months. After Milledge's visit last May she had thought often of driving over to Sky Valley, on some pretext or other, just to set the house in order and perhaps make a dinner for Royce and old Seth Hornblow. Ashbrooke was working in town now, with Fredericks and Dooley, the real estate men. Milledge had hinted broadly to Jo that the place wanted a woman's hand now and then. But she was convinced that any sympathy or friendship she might proffer would be icily rejected.

Once, when she had been on her way to town in old "Mystery," her father's obscurely origined automobile, she had met Royce, driving his team of grays, on a narrow strip of road that had been washed out on either side by a recent three days' rain. The skidding car came ludicrously to a halt almost under the horses' heads. Jo leaned from the window and looked up at Royce with an effort at smiling, but her lips stiffened at the rush of blood she felt in her cheeks. He actually seemed to be having difficulty in recognizing her!

"Shall I back up?" she asked brightly. "You may not believe it, but this thing *does* back up!"

He had smiled then and she saw how harshly blue his eyes were, and what a carved look had come about his mouth and cheekbones.

"I think I can get around it, Jo," he said, and then with a faint smile, "That's a unique model you've got there."

"It's a good car! Dad paid twenty-five dollars for it—just half as much as he paid for the first one we had."

"Keep that up and you'll be getting one for nothing." He had raised his hand then and driven his team a little to the left, past the car and into the road again.

That had been all. A dozen words exchanged by two country people meeting on a country road, their words lost now to the wind. But she had seen his eyes and had heard how in a strange, half-awake manner he had uttered her name.

Again in June, when she had been fishing off Spite Island, she had rowed in through the reeds to steal a glimpse at the loon's nest flimsily rocking there, and had seen Royce sitting in a boat behind a jetty of stones and fallen trees, casting for bass. As if he had felt her eyes upon him, he turned and looked at her, again in that slow and troubled, groping way, the way of a person heavily drawing himself out of a leaden sleep. He had nodded merely in response to her greeting, turned his back, and gone on casting. . . .

Dora Vandermeyer was talking. "Seth Hornblow says Royce has been trying to get a job in just about every school in the state. He knows because he takes the letters out for him."

Mrs. Dibney shook her head. "Still and all, I s'pose the school boards have to think of the children. Gossip like that follows a person around—and there's lots of people even in Carthia—to this very day—that ain't so sure but what he shot that Neal Whitman—"

Old Mrs. Vandermeyer sniffed sharply. "Hmph! He didn't have the gumption to do it on purpose, if that's what you're gettin' at. I'd think more of him if he did."

"Well, it's none of our business, I'm sure," Mrs. Dibney declared. "And I'm glad, for one, that it isn't."

The old lady sighed. "No, mebbe not. But you can't help feelin' for people, even when it ain't your business."

"The Hilyards'll make out," Dora scoffed. "I don't see what you've got to fret about, just because they can't put on the dog like they used to. They did it long enough!"

Old Mrs. Vandermeyer looked away through the kitchen window. “Well, I’ve always held—and I hold still—it’s a good thing for somebody in the district to put on the dog, as you say. It kind of jerks up the rest of us. If you haven’t got a sun to look to, there’s no day.”

Jo placed the corn in the kettle, salted it, and poured water over it.

Some long days and weeks afterward she knew that the change in her being had come at that moment. A woman had done this to Royce Hilyard, a woman who had never been worthy to bear his name, no matter what his faults, no matter how lofty and arrogant he had been! But she, Jo Porte, was a woman too, and in her own unobtrusive way she might do at least something toward repairing the damage Teresa had wrought.

She could crush down her pride, enter the Hilyard house, and put her strong hands to work there. It would have to be when Royce was not at home, when she was sure he was away at the fall plowing in some distant field. She would have an ally in Seth Hornblow, she knew, and even if Royce were to surprise her there she would permit no objection of his to discourage her.

A lighthearted, wholesome energy gave a sudden buoyancy to her spirits, an ardent impatience to begin the task that waited in the house she had once called the Stately Mansion. Tomorrow she would drive boldly over to Sky Valley on the pretext of discussing chicken mash with Seth Hornblow.

2

“So—she’s been here again?” Royce demanded, throwing aside his wet jacket and hat as he frowned about the glistening kitchen. There were even crisp, clean, white-and-yellow Swiss-dotted curtains on the windows this time.

Seth Hornblow, shaking down the fire in the polished range, grinned dryly. “Not only *been*,” he chuckled. “She’s still here. You had no business comin’ back here for another hour.”

“Where is she?”

“Well, she tore round the attic this afternoon an’ now she’s wallowin’ through that lovely mess o’ yours in the tower room. No use losin’ your

temper over it, though. Won't do no good if you do. I done all the talkin' to her I could, an' she told me to go to hell. Least, that was what she meant, even if she didn't use just them words. It's like this—"

"Look here," Royce interrupted with extreme patience as he sat down to pull off his boots, "you're in on this—just as I've suspected from the first. You wouldn't be talking your head off if you weren't trying to hide something."

The old man lifted the stove lid and spat into the fire. "Havin' a woman like Jo 'round once in a while sort o' limbers up a man's tongue, I guess. I was forgettin' how to talk, livin' in the same house with you. Since Ash went to town—"

"Give me those slippers," Royce ordered, and tossed his boots into the broom closet.

Seth raised a quizzical eye. "Puttin' things in their place, anyhow, I notice. Hardest thing with me is to remember not to spit on the floor. But there's no arguin'—a clean house is always warmer, just like Jo says. How'd you happen to come in early, by the by?"

"If you must know, I finished plowing the south field and decided to knock off and call it a day." He thrust his feet into his slippers, then stepped close to Seth and lowered his voice. "Did you tell her plainly that we don't want her coming around here?"

"Well—yes, by golly, I did! I told her them was your orders, anyhow."

The muscles flicked up and down in Royce's jaws. It was a nasty look, Seth observed. He watched Royce turn on his heel and stride toward the rear stairway.

"All right—then *I'll* tell her!"

Seth muttered, shook his head, then knelt down to inspect the pan of biscuits in the oven, as Jo had instructed him to do. This was the fourth time she had been in the house in less than three weeks. The place was just beginning to feel like home once more and now, he supposed, Royce would spoil it all. Jo would never darken the door again after today. Doggone it, the girl had her pride, and he wouldn't blame her. Well, he couldn't blame Royce, either, exactly. That had been an awful smack to take from a woman —the one he'd taken from that no-account wife of his. It left a man kind of blind in his soul, a thing like that.

The door to the tower room was open and Royce stalked in. The room had been thoroughly swept, the floor around the margin of the rug polished, and there was a cheerful birch blaze in the fireplace. Jo, on her knees with a dust cloth in front of the bookshelf, had her back to him when he entered. But now she got unhurriedly to her feet and smiled at him almost mischievously.

"What are you doing here?" he asked evenly.

"There's nothing very mysterious about what I'm doing, is there?" Her voice was light.

He made an impatient gesture. "I know you mean well, Jo, and I ought to be grateful to you, I suppose. But we've got to understand each other."

"What is there to understand?"

"Seth told you, didn't he, that we can't have you working around here? We can't afford to pay anyone—and we're not going to accept service for nothing." His face was set with cold determination. "In fact, your being here embarrasses me."

She laughed, resolute and gay. "I was afraid I'd be caught sooner or later. Seth can't be trusted." She stood with one hand on her hip and gave a fillip of the dust cloth with the other. "Now that you *are* here, we had better understand both sides of it. I don't want to be paid for anything I'm doing. I wouldn't accept it. If you offered me money—*I'd* be embarrassed. Besides, I'm not doing this for you."

A puzzled look came into his eyes. "This house—isn't worth it," he said flatly, "though I don't see what—"

"I wouldn't expect you to understand," she replied. "It's what this house means—used to mean to me, long ago, before I ever saw the inside of it. I used to call it—" she hesitated and looked at him for a moment—"I used to call it the Stately Mansion."

He stared at her and she leaned her elbow casually on the back of a chair. "It was just after I read *The Chambered Nautilus*," she added, folding one corner of the dust cloth in her fingers.

He understood suddenly and flushed. "I see. I'm sorry your idea of it has been so badly treated," he said ironically. "You were probably wrong to start with, but—"

"I wasn't wrong—not entirely," she insisted, her voice still soft and absent, her eyes wandering about the room as if she saw something tangibly

fine and splendid there.

A hard chill passed through Royce. It was not the first time she had succeeded, by oblique and delicate suggestion, in invoking the spirit of old Ashbrooke Hilyard.

"Wrong or right," Royce said, "it makes very little difference now. I don't like to be rude, but I've got to insist that you don't come here again."

She threw back her head suddenly and her eyes gleamed. "Of course, you can throw me out—physically. You're quite capable of it. But I'll come back until you get tired of that, too!"

His gaze narrowed angrily. "No," he replied slowly. "I won't throw you out. You'd probably enjoy that. If you insist on staying—"

"I have no intention of staying," Jo retorted unexpectedly. "So far as I am concerned, you can live with your damned little misery till you're sick of it. Sit down—and enjoy it!"

She darted past him before he could make any response. Royce stood looking after her, his mouth tight, and then with a crude oath he flung himself into his grandfather's chair.

3

It was a winter of record cold and stupendous snows. From the Portes' scant stores Jo daily scattered corn upon the blue-white drifts for the anxious, lean-necked pheasants, kept a sheaf of barley in the crotch of a tree, and faithfully sprinkled crumbs and bits of fat about the yard for the chickadees and jays. She could recall no other winter when she had gone out on cold mornings and shaken frozen squirrels down out of trees, their tiny paws curved inward upon their breasts.

The farmers worked together to keep the road open to town, both ways around the lake, but there were days of blizzards when their most heroic efforts availed them nothing. Trips to town were infrequent, and especially during the months of January and February no one ventured from home unless driven by necessity. The needs of the families about the lakes were simply met. There was fuel in plenty for all who could haul it out of the woods; vegetables from the gardens had been stored in cellars; shelves were laden with jars of wild fruits that had been harvested in season; and it was a

lean day indeed when a farmer's wife couldn't set you down before a thick venison steak, for the woods were full of deer and the weather kept the wardens close to their own fires. Tiny fishhouses dotted the lake, too, the smoke from their chimneys whipping away on the wind.

Ernest Porte had beaten a road across the ice on Fallen Star, past Crane Island, and out upon the county highway again at a point close to the Hilyard gateway. Pride had kept Jo from entering that gateway since the day Royce had talked to her in the tower room last fall. It was a pride not easily borne, for every time she passed the place with her father, he would call her attention to the house and declare what a pity it was that it should be going to rack and ruin. It was hard for Jo to believe, even now, that it was not still—on the inside, at least—the spacious, glowing, clean place she remembered.

On an afternoon in late December, when Jo and her father were crossing the lake on their way home from town, Seth Hornblow put his head out from the doorway of his fishhouse and hailed them. They stopped and talked a little about the weather and the fishing—and a very little about Royce Hilyard. But that very little had been given added meaning when old Seth looked up at Jo with a secret smile that brought a sore knot into her throat. For what gain was there in pride and what pleasure could be won from nursing a spite as if it were something precious?

The next afternoon she baked an extra pan of buns and sugar-coated them, her glance going out of the window every little while for some sign of smoke rising from the little fishhouse toward the Hilyard shore. There was no sign that day and none the next, but on the third afternoon it was there, and Jo sent her father across the ice with a loaf of her own baking and a jar of sweet tomato pickles to give to Seth Hornblow. Thereafter, except for two weeks in January and February when the danger was so great that her father forbade her going, Jo went on skis every week, bundled to the eyes but finding delight in the whistling cold, and left something with Seth. It was never anything much, as she told Seth repeatedly, but the old fellow never ceased to wonder at it.

The neighbors, too, became interested—and curious. "Why don't you marry him, Jo!" Brade Toufang asked one evening when he had called to see Ernest Porte. The one thing, ironically enough and blessedly, too, that none of them seemed to see was that she loved Royce Hilyard—had always loved him.

Her father, however, was not deceived, although he had delicately kept his counsel. When he did speak finally it was with an awkward hesitancy that made Jo smile. She was getting dressed, on an evening when the cold had let up a little, to run across to Seth Hornblow's fishhouse.

"I thought Royce looked a mite better when I seen him in Meeker's this morning," Ernest began, clearing his throat. "He seems to be doin' well on them scraps you've been sendin' him off and on."

Jo drew her jacket belt snugly about her waist, then pulled her woolen cap down over her ears. "Scraps, indeed! If it weren't for poor old Seth I wouldn't send him a morsel!"

Ernest studied the bowl of his pipe. "Is it Seth, then, you've been worryin' about all winter?"

Jo looked at him quickly, her cheeks burning. "Have you noticed me worrying about anyone?"

Her father leaned forward and knocked the ashes from his pipe into the wood-box. "Seems I'm barkin' up the wrong tree," he said, and glanced over his shoulder with a chuckle.

She hurried out then, got her skis from the woodshed, and put them on quickly in the brilliant frosty radiance from the west.

Never before had she gone so swiftly over the half mile to Crane Island. She was breathless when she slipped the skis off at last and opened the door of the fishhouse.

But it was not Seth who sat there beside the little sheet iron stove. It was Royce Hilyard. She drew back involuntarily.

"You might as well come in," he said negligently, but with a faint smile. "Seth decided to stay at home today." He leaned over the square hole in the ice. "A pike just sailed by that must have been well over fifteen pounds."

Jo entered and closed the door behind her. There was no point in running away now, she thought, even though she wanted to. Pride had kept her out of Royce Hilyard's sight, but it was just as strong to hold her here, alone with him and so close that she might put out her hand and touch him.

"Come and look down," he invited, and Jo knelt opposite him on the ice.

The water to a profound depth was a pure green crystal. Gliding through it were the luminous ghosts of fish, some stately and slow while others darted this way and that, as though through an invisible labyrinth, their fins

flashing rose and silver in the reflected light. In all the winters of spearing through ice Jo had never wearied of this hypnotic spectacle. It was always as if you were being drawn down into that eternal glassy wakefulness of flat, jeweled eyes.

For a half minute or so while she watched she was almost unaware of Royce. Now, when he spoke abruptly, she was startled.

"Makes you feel like going in head first," he said.

"I've often thought that." She sat back on her heels and looked across at him. He was kneeling on a gunny sack, smoking a cigarette.

"Take that stool there, Jo, and I'll put a little more wood on the fire."

But to be enclosed with Royce in this tiny, intimate space was suddenly intolerable. She got nervously to her feet.

"I must be getting back. It'll be time to make supper—"

"Is that your reason for going?"

"It's reason enough."

"Why not admit that you just don't want to stay here with me? You wouldn't be in such a hurry if I weren't here, would you?"

"You have probably forgotten the last time you spoke to me."

His smile was cynical. "No—I haven't forgotten. I don't blame you, either. I was a bit boorish, wasn't I? But there's no point in our acting like children, is there? I asked Seth to stay home today. I came over purposely to talk to you—especially to thank you for what you've done for us this winter."

She flushed and glanced away, her hand on the door latch. "It was nothing at all. I'd rather—"

"Will you tell me just why you did it?"

His voice was gentle—but more distant than ever. If any healing had come to his spirit during the past winter, it had not drawn him any closer to her. She wished all at once that he would return to his old brusqueness. It was more human, at least, than this controlled courtesy.

He had risen and was waiting for her reply. The shack was just high enough to permit of his standing upright. Jo opened the door.

"I did it for reasons you would never understand," she replied.

“Probably. I can’t tell, of course—not knowing what they are.”

Her eyes rested for a moment upon the broken button on his leather jacket. It would be dropping off one of these days, she reflected. Then she faced him resolutely.

“Have you never heard of people being—just neighbors?” she asked him—and went out at once.

A moment later she was off with long, sure glides across the hard-packed snow.

Chapter Four

1

From the ridge of the Stone Field the land flowed away southward to a horizon darkly blue and legendary, the sky a hollow and tremendous void of paler blue above it. The broad expanse of earth was parqueted into fields frailly green or strongly green in accordance with the plantings and the mottled areas lying fallow. Now, after the rain, it was all like a world under clear glass. Nearer trees stood out, individual and startling; the great stones in the meadow below were separated magically, each in its own moist, reddish luster. Even the sheep, grazing on the green-pocked hummocks, seemed strangely fixed, illumined, and illusory. Royce was reminded of his sensations when, as a small boy, he had first looked through a stereoscope.

He spoke to the grays, backing them closer to another boulder, slung the parbuckle around the base of the stone and hooked the chain to the doubletree.

"All right, Major," he said gently.

The powerful flanks of the team sloped downward with a quiver of muscles, a resolute buckling of fore and hind hoofs in the spongy ground. Then the mighty upward strain, the tremor of effort running like a riffle up the satiny withers. The boulder groaned in its dark pocket, pebbles of earth flew from it as though in panic, there was a short, sucking sound like a muffled gasp, then the horses fell back a step and shook themselves in their harness as though in triumph. Immediately upon the air lay the faintly acrid, faintly sweet and sullen smell of the earth that had bedded the stone through its own shrouded ages.

Royce had begun work on the Stone Field this morning. The first of May. It would be easy to remember that date when it came to reckoning the length of time he would finally have spent on it.

He had had to steel himself to begin work where Len Hilyard had left off, even though a year and a half had passed since that day. But after a

while the sheer challenge in the undertaking had instilled in him a strange, almost exalted mood; he caught himself feeling the spirit of Len Hilyard rising within him like a waking memory.

Now, toward sunset, he glanced back and saw what little change the day's work had made in that ominously scarped vista to the south. Well, he would have to rest his horses and go at it again tomorrow. Many of the rocks were so deeply imbedded that he had first to dig a trench around them before he could get a purchase for the chain. He was not a little tired himself right now.

But it was a good feeling. It was no longer a weariness of the mind, for which there was no restorative. A good night's rest, and he would be ready to go at it again. There was more to it than that, too. It was as if others were feeling and thinking within him—all those others, feeling and thinking through him out of a deep, earthbound past: his father, his grandfather, his great-grandfather of the early pioneer days, and those dim forebears of his back in Connecticut who had, before the Revolution, sworn allegiance to an English acre even while they denied it to an English king.

These were his, Royce Hilyard's, acres by a right that none could purchase. No circumstance of time, no trick of fate, no accident or caprice of human experience, could change that. Destiny, through him, was taking hold again, moving toward its unforgettable end, shaping its eternal and productive processes. He could not hope to sound the mystery of Nature's purposes nor plumb the depth of her conceits, but he knew himself to be a part of her design and yielded himself gloriously to its making.

He drove his team to the watering trough in the yard, dropped the reins, and looked about him for some sign of Seth Hornblow. When he finally called the old man's voice came from the direction of the house. Royce looked and saw Seth standing in the kitchen doorway—and with him Jo Porte. He looked a second time before he was sure his eyes had not deceived him. Since that day in the fishhouse two months ago, he had seen her only once and that had been on the street in Carthia.

It was just as well, he realized. He had never tried to deceive himself concerning his feelings for Jo Porte. Her definite appeal for him had not diminished through those months when his world had been torn wide open. It was best for them both that they had seen so little of each other.

But what brought her over here now? While he waited beside the trough, Jo went into the house and Seth came hurrying down the path toward him.

“What brought her back?” he asked shortly.

Seth grinned. “ ’Tain’t so much what brought her. It was her bringin’ a cake that did it. This is May Day, an’ we never give it a thought.”

“So it is!” Royce’s eyes lifted once more toward the house. “Did she have to go in to—”

“Cripes, you ain’t goin’ to get started on that again, are you?”

“I’m not starting on anything. But the house is a holy mess. We haven’t gone over it since last Sunday.”

“Well, this is Friday, ain’t it? If she feels like turnin’ to an’ puttin’ a little shine on things, I don’t see no harm in that. Fact is, I told her to go on in an’ look it over. I’m no hand at housekeepin’—an’ you ain’t any better to my way o’ thinkin’.”

“All right,” Royce conceded, and started reluctantly for the house.

“Somebody was tryin’ to get you on the phone when I was gettin’ the milk pails a while ago,” Seth called after him.

“Who was it?”

“I couldn’t make head nor tail to it. Sounded like half a dozen women tryin’ to talk all at once. I told ’em you was out in the field and to call later.”

“Probably Ash trying to get me to come in on a party,” Royce said to himself, and started off again toward the house.

“An’ don’t you start in raisin’ hell in there like you did the last time,” Seth warned.

Royce looked back at him, but he was already on his way to the barn with the team.

When he entered the house Jo, with a dish towel tied about her waist, was carrying a pan of water to the stove. She smiled up at him as he paused in the doorway.

“Hello!”

“Back on the job of being a good neighbor, I see.”

“Not a very good one, I’m afraid. I had to be asked to come this time. Milledge wrote me last week and reminded me that May Day was coming and she wouldn’t be here to bake you a devil’s food cake. So—I baked one and brought it over—with her compliments.”

“Poor old Milledge! She still thinks of me as a kid. But Seth had his nerve to ask you to come in here and clean up this mess.”

“It isn’t bad, really. I’m surprised. You and Seth have managed very well, considering. If you show me what there is for supper I can have it on the stove while I tidy up the kitchen. I ate before I left home.”

Royce looked about him in helpless surrender. Then he grinned suddenly, admitting defeat. “All right—go ahead! You’ll find cold potatoes and pork chops in the ice box—and some other leftovers. I’ll go and clean up a bit, seeing it’s May Day. God knows I need it!”

They smiled at each other, a cozy, friendly smile, but Royce was on his guard again immediately. Jo watched him go, then walked across to the ice box and opened the door. She gave a short, rueful laugh. After supper, she decided, she would clear out the accumulation of half-dry ketchup bottles, saucers of viscid jelly and mildewed odds and ends thrust artlessly back into darkness and long since forgotten.

Seth came in while she was slicing potatoes into the frying pan on the stove.

“Hm—smells mighty good!” he exclaimed with bluff heartiness. “I get so blame’ sick o’ my own cookin’ I can’t look it in the face. An’ his’n a darn’ sight worse’n mine!” He lowered his voice. “Where’d he go?”

“He’s upstairs—taking a bath, I think.”

“Guess he’s goin’ to town tonight. I think there’s a party or something brewin’. Wish he’d go in an’ make a regular spree of it. Fellow like him has to let off steam once in a while, somewhere. He’s gettin’ too healthy these days. He wasn’t nasty to you, was he?” As he spoke he took off his corduroy jacket and hung it up.

Jo wrinkled her nose in a grin. “He’s scared of me.”

“Do you know what I think?” Seth bent toward her, his sage, hobgoblin face twinkling. “I think he’s gettin’ to like it here. He’s gettin’ hold of himself again—more like he used to be. He’s gettin’ more like his father every day—in the things he says an’ the way he does things. An’ he’s been writin’ again in that book o’ his—up there in the tower room, till all hours o’ the night sometimes.” He appeared to be on the point of saying more, then evidently thought better of it. “Guess I’ll shave an’ go into town myself tonight—this bein’ the first o’ May.”

“Better be careful,” Jo cautioned him. “There’s a moon, Seth.”

But she was thinking, with thrilled excitement, of what he had told her about Royce. If he was really writing again, up there in his grandfather's room, it must surely mean that he was beginning to forget the catastrophe of a year and a half ago, that health was returning to his mind as well as to his body. Some day he would be completely free of it—cold and clear and free! With a queer, bitter, self-effacing pride in him, Jo straightened her shoulders, closed her eyes for a moment, then went on with her task of preparing the meal.

She set a table in the kitchen, and while Royce and Seth ate she swept and dusted the living room, gathered up books and old papers, cleaned the hearth, and laid fresh logs. But her pleasure in the doing had none of the tumultuous agitation she had once known. She felt drearily inconsequential now.

She was still busy in the living room when Seth and Royce cleared the table and washed the supper dishes. Then Seth went away to his room and came back dressed in his striped gray suit, old but still jaunty, plaid shirt and dotted bow tie, glistening, hump-toed shoes. He presented himself proudly for Jo's inspection.

"Back where I come from," he said, "May Day used to mean something. We used to hang May baskets on the doors—for our best girls. Then we'd run like hell—scared o' gettin' kissed. That's the way it was, you see. If they catched us they could kiss us." He chuckled reminiscently. "Now that I'm fifty-five—sometimes I wish I hadn't run quite so hard."

"You're not too old yet, Seth."

Jo laughed, kissed him suddenly, and inhaled a strong draught of lilac hair tonic.

"By golly—" Seth blushed, swaggered modestly, and started for the door.

"Stay away from the Half Moon Café," Royce advised him. "Adelaide was asking about you last time I was in."

"Adelaide? Well—aw, shucks!"

"What time will you be back?" Royce asked.

"If the car holds together you can look for me 'round midnight," Seth replied airily. "No tellin', of course. You're sure you don't want to come in?"

"Nothing doing! If you run across Ash, tell him I'd like to see him out here over Sunday if he can make it."

"I'll tell him. So long, Jo. Come over again soon—when he ain't round, eh?"

When Seth had gone Royce said, "You've done enough, Jo. Better let it go. You must be pretty tired."

"I'm not a bit," she assured him lightly. "I'll be through in a little while."

She saw that he was looking very strong and clean in his tan flannel shirt and whipcord breeches, his hair neatly parted and swept back from his temples, already faintly gray. But constraint was upon him again, masking his eyes, altering the shape of his mouth.

"I'm going down to the shore," he said. "Seth got our old boat down today and I want to look it over before it gets too dark. And if the phone rings—just say that I'm not at home, will you? I don't want to answer it."

She watched him as he passed from the house and down the path through the birches. There was an alert, steely expectancy in his mood, she thought. An indefinable uneasiness came over her. But she could not go home just yet. With Royce safely out of the house, she could spend a little while in the tower room, putting it in order and enjoying again that strange, thrillingly nostalgic sense of the past which it always created within her.

A half hour later, when she was seated on the floor in front of the fireplace in the tower room, reading one of old Ashbrooke Hilyard's dog-eared historical accounts of the opening of the West, she heard Royce come back into the house. With a not unpleasurable feeling of guilt, she closed the book and got quickly to her feet.

She went to the bathroom, washed her hands and face, and tidied her hair. Her cheeks were shining like ripe apples.

"What a country wench I am, anyhow," she thought dismally. "And getting to look more like one every day!"

She found a can of talcum powder that must have been Royce's and applied some of it lightly to her face with a towel. She could at least say good-by to him without looking too impossibly rustic!

A car was entering the driveway. In the hall Jo paused and listened. Someone was coming in through the front door. A woman's voice chimed out with a brittle, daring sort of gaiety, calling Royce's name. Jo stood rooted in blank astonishment. The voice was Teresa's!

2

He stood with his back to the living-room fireplace, his hands clasped tightly behind him, and watched Teresa lilt toward the couch, smiling with unbelievable innocence and gracefully peeling off her green suède gloves. She wore a small, rakish, yellow hat and a tailored suit of some green and yellow mixture, and burnt-yellow suède shoes. She looked modish and costly. Her face was arranged to a smart pallor in which her crimsoned mouth appeared larger than it naturally was. On the ring finger of her left hand she wore a diamond that winced blue and white under the reading lamp as she came toward him. A rectangular diamond, Royce observed, big as a match box. She had apparently done well by herself in California!

With that very eloquent left hand she swept off her hat, tossed it to the floor, and fluffed out her hair. It was the same living aureole of light that had dazzled him when he was cruelly young. He thought of Jo Porte's hair. It had depth, like sunned wood. But it was not for him. Neither, very definitely, was Teresa's.

"Aren't you going to say 'hello' at least?" she asked, and pouted prettily.

"Why have you come here?"

"Now, Royce—we aren't going to be silly and primitive, are we?"

"I'm asking you why you came." There was no change of inflection in his voice, but whitish lines appeared about his lips.

"Is Seth still here?"

"He's in town at present, but—"

She seated herself on the couch. "I was hoping you'd be alone."

As he stared coldly down at her his eyes were more black than blue. Teresa gave a little shiver that was only half feigned, crossed her arms, and cuddled her shoulders in her palms.

"Don't stand there looking so terrifying!" she wailed demurely. "Please sit down, Royce! I just came to—to talk to you a little, if you'll let me. It's been so very long!" Her tone descended to that humid sweetness he remembered all too vividly, that provocative wheedling with its hint of naïve wantonness which she used to employ at will.

He gave a sardonic smile at the transparency of it, shrugged his shoulders, and sat down in the big chair half facing her. But Teresa had seen

that smile, and beneath her suddenly narrowed eyes faint color appeared in her cheeks.

"I was afraid to come back, Royce." Her lips trembled and Royce looked studiedly away. "I was afraid of—of everyone. But I had to come. Mother couldn't leave Dad alone—he has been *so* ill—and someone had to look after the furniture and see that it was packed carefully and—we sold our house, you know."

"I didn't know."

"Through Mr. Stanley. When I decided to come I wrote Cecily Burton, and she made me promise to stay with her. She gave me a cocktail party this afternoon and I suddenly felt so terribly lonely! I just had to phone you. I called all afternoon without getting an answer—and then Seth answered at last—but I couldn't make him understand a word. So I borrowed Cecily's car and came out alone after the party."

She had gone on breathlessly while he stared at her in candid amazement.

"I still don't know why you should have come out here," he persisted.

"Oh, Royce!" she cried, leaning toward him, her hands outstretched in appeal. "If you only *knew* how I've suffered—for everything! You couldn't be so unforgiving—so hard and cruel to me! I had hoped—you wouldn't *believe* how I've hoped—that you would have relented toward me a little, Royce. Even if I *was* so terribly to blame for everything."

"This isn't getting us anywhere," Royce said with deadly quiet. "If you have anything of importance to say, let us get it over with."

She drew out a scrap of handkerchief and began to sob into it with what seemed like genuine woe.

"For God's sake, Teresa!" he exclaimed.

Distaste and exasperation battled within him against a rising feeling of pity for her. He stirred helplessly, then got up and strode futilely to the other side of the room.

"I'm sorry," she whispered tremulously. "I haven't forgotten how you hate to see me cry. It's just—just that I feel so terribly alone. I—"

"You must have known how it would be," he said in a more kindly voice as he came and stood before her.

She made a brave effort, smiled wanly. “I should have known, but—” She saw him glance at the ring on her left hand. “Yes,” she nodded, and lifted her hand so that the jewel shone magnificently, “this—it had to be, you know, Royce.”

“I’m glad you’ve found someone to start over with,” he said with unbending formality. “I hope he’ll make you happier than I did.”

She got up with a lithe, sinuous movement that startled him with its swiftness. She was so close to him that he could smell the subtle fragrance of her hair—the familiar, aching fragrance that once, a lifetime ago, would not let him be.

“Royce!” She spoke his name with a throaty cajolery that did not quite veil her stark willfulness. Before he could draw back her fingers had closed with feverish tenacity on his shirt front and had clutched upward to the collar open at his neck and chest. It was paradoxical, he thought with some frigidly separate part of his brain, but a fascinated revulsion rendered him powerless to move. The blood thundered in his ears as he heard her say wildly, rapidly, “He’s not *you*! Nobody ever can be. He’s rich, but he isn’t young, and I don’t love him—that way. But there’s nothing else for me, Royce—can’t you understand? I’ve got to have money. I’ve got to live. I’ll marry him—and I’ll respect him. I’ll be true to him, too—after I marry him. But now, Royce—darling—while I’m still free—you’re the one I really love. You’ve never looked so wonderful—so strong and—” She drew herself closer to him. “Darling—before I go back to him—”

He looked down at her parted, nakedly voracious lips, her drooping, deliberately slumbrous eyes, and all at once the room staggered about him in an all-encompassing, overwhelming rage. He seized her wrists and with an exclamation of senseless profanity threw her violently back upon the couch.

Then he stood away from her, his nostrils sharp and gray. His breathing came with harsh pain.

“I’m sorry I had to do that, Teresa. But you know why as well as I do. You’d better—go.”

For an instant she had seemed stunned, disheveled to the depths of her vanity. But now she flashed erect and confronted him with shrill, articulate venom.

“Yes—I know why. You fool—you dumb farmer! You’ve never been anything else, and you never will be. You and your precious ideals—your poetry and your writing! I tried to make something of you, but you didn’t

have it in you and you never will. Stay here with your muck—that's where you belong! Is it any wonder I wasn't true to you? If you'd had any brains you'd have seen for yourself. But you're dumb—just dumb! You thought it was terrible for me to fall in love with Neal Whitman, didn't you? I've never told you even the half of it. Ask your own brother Ashbrooke—he's not the virtuous fool you are! *I* happen to know that."

Her laughter rang out in piercing, vindictive frenzy. Royce moistened his lips, but they seemed at once to dry to dust. He stood gazing at her while she swept up her gloves, her hat, her purse.

"Ashbrooke?" he inquired, almost wonderingly.

She laughed, looking straight into his face. "Why not? He's human, isn't he?"

"Get out!" he ordered savagely.

"You don't have to tell me to get out, darling. Give my love to your delectable brother. He'll understand."

Royce had a ridiculous sense of pivoting around on the balls of his feet while he watched her go. The door slammed behind her. Her car started up angrily outside.

It could never be reckoned in time—the space of his standing there on the floor of the living room. His pulses churned, died, churned again. There gradually came over him, like a mad shouting from within his being, the need for release from the vise that held his mind and body.

3

Jo had been crouching at the head of the stairs, listening in terror. All of the doors on the floor below were open—from the living room to the hall, from the hall to the kitchen. Even if she had gone down the back way, there was still a possibility of Teresa's discovering her presence.

If she had gone down immediately and walked out with cool indifference, the worst result would have been, probably, an amused insinuation on Teresa's part. And Royce would have quickly disabused her of any such conclusion. But for long moments after Jo had recognized Teresa's voice, she had felt inert, incapable of making any decision, and the talk rising to her clearly from below had become more violent every instant.

At the last, just before Teresa's insolent leave-taking, she had risen on trembling legs and would have fled down the stairs and out of the house, away from what she feared might grow into another disastrous happening. But Teresa had come into the hall then and Jo, cowering back in the shadows above, had been suddenly glad that she had not yielded to that impulse to run. Selfish and unprincipled as Teresa was, it would have been too brutal to let her know that another woman had been witness to her humiliation.

Jo leaned for a moment against the wall of the upper passage in the dark. Strangely, it was neither Teresa nor Royce who was vivid in her imagination now, but that cascading black and white staircase—not dull with the once glossy paint shredding, as it really was—but lustrous and bold, as it had been when she first saw it when she was fourteen. And now she was twenty-eight. She was twenty-eight! The gleaming, leisurely grace of the winding, white-balustraded stairs to the dark and polished pool below—had she been only fourteen then when she had seen it for the first time?

She groped her way through the dark corridor to the tower room, switched on the soft light there, and sat down. Her thoughts were intolerably confused. Royce—Ashbrooke—Teresa! But Royce could not know that she had heard what Teresa had said about Ashbrooke. That was something, at least, she reflected with thin warmth. She could slip out now, the back way, and trust to avoiding him. He would be suffering an agony of degraded pride at the moment, of unbearable shame for Ashbrooke, for Teresa, for himself. For himself, the blind, trusting fool! After all the rest he had to take this. Neal Whitman hadn't been enough—Royce had to take this, too. All at once the pity she had felt for Teresa, in her bare and shameless advances and in Royce's furious rejection of her, vanished completely. Now, seeing clearly, she saw Royce. She saw him alone in utmost disillusion, mortification, and defeat.

There was a sound in the hall at the door. Jo looked up. Royce was coming into the room. He was smoking a cigarette. He looked at her, smiled faintly, and tossed the cigarette into the fireplace.

"You're still here," he observed casually. "I wasn't sure—when I didn't hear your car leave."

Jo gathered herself back in the big chair and met his unnaturally brilliant eyes with a level look.

"I didn't want to go downstairs while she was there. I was just going when she came in—"

But he was not listening to her. “You—you heard everything, I suppose? You couldn’t very well help it.”

“Yes, I heard everything.”

He walked deliberately over and stood beside her chair. “Then—perhaps you know how very close I came to—to yielding to her?”

Jo turned her eyes toward the fire. “No—I didn’t know.”

“I want everything clear between us tonight,” he said then. “She would have stayed here tonight if I had asked her. You realize that, don’t you?”

“Yes.”

“And—for one moment—I *could* have asked her. Can you understand that?”

“Of course. But—I’m glad you didn’t.”

With a fixed smile still about his lips, he took her hands and drew her up to him.

“You’re glad?”

“Yes.”

He pushed the hair back from her forehead and looked intently down at her eyes, her trembling mouth.

“Have you ever guessed that my conscience was never quite clear—about Teresa—because of you?”

“No.”

“But you’ve known that I have wanted you—for a long time. You know that, don’t you?”

Her eyes, straight and wide, met his. It was a sensation, she thought, not unlike going into fathomless water with neither hope nor wish of ever coming away. Last winter, when they had both gazed down into the open square in the ice . . .

“Yes,” she whispered steadily. “I know.”

His hands moved up to her shoulders. He slipped her left sleeve down until the little half-moon scar shimmered palely under his eyes in the dim light. He drew her yielding body up to him, bent down, and pressed his mouth against the scar.

She was not clinging and lax when he gathered her up in his arms; she was a vibrant, impatient thing. Her lips, warm and rich to his own, were given without restraint, an unbelievable token, a promise beyond thought.

4

The little clock on the table beside Royce's bed stood at ten minutes of four. He had not slept.

Now the window showed a faint, pearly luster, and from moment to moment a rousing bird tossed experimentally a thin sweet note into the coming dawn.

He kept his eyes unwaveringly upon that area of half-light. He asked himself repeatedly one question—and for that question there was no answer. He had said to her afterwards, "I'm sorry, Jo. My dear—dear, I'm sorry." Why had he said that? Even now that he was clearheaded and in possession of himself he could not find an answer. Her response had been so simple, so direct, so final in its judgment of him and in its acceptance. And then she had gone away without a word—without a good-by.

He got from his bed, put on his clothes and a pair of old tennis shoes, and went quietly downstairs and out by way of the back door. In amiable surprise Seth Hornblow's dog, Tip, bounded about his legs and followed him through the yard, out past the barns and into the open toward the Stone Field.

There he stopped and looked down over a soft, mist-cradled world that seemed to him now unfamiliar and alien. Was this, he wondered bleakly, what happened to a man after he had done an irreparable wrong? Did every physical object with which his life had been inseparably joined suddenly recoil from him, reject his existence as though he had never been?

He sat down on a clump of moss-covered roots and stones on the west rim of the field. The dog nosed under the palm of his hand and looked up at him with questioning, soft old eyes. Royce absently stroked the silky ears, and Tip stretched himself out contentedly on the dewy grass at his feet.

It seemed to Royce now that he sat in a timeless vacancy, islanded on this hummock which had somehow gone adrift in the mist and had been cast up on the shore of a void. The fog in the valley below lay in loose shoals, the ragged spaces between them showing almost black and of a depth that was

fathomless. The mackerel sky, touched with violet in the upper east, was ruched with gossamer so frail that it seemed the slow changing of the light must destroy it. All at once the floating reefs of mist below grew transparent as ghostly fire, the earth seemed to heave with a sudden dark glistening, and the rim of the sun stood up from the horizon.

Royce drew a deep breath. He heard, flung up near him, a meadow lark's silvery notes, and farther away in the marsh hollow to the north the thumping, unbirdlike cry of a bittern. He drew the dog's head close down against his legs and stroked the gentle muzzle while he stared down across the Stone Field.

It was studding up now into the level shafts of gold from the east, the rocks bristling with their patches of mica. The short-cropped grass was netted white with dew and the small, early flowers had a veiled look. The sheep began to stir and already wore their preoccupied expression as though they had never slept.

This, Royce thought—and almost spoke aloud from the weight of emotion within him—this was what he wanted, this was where he belonged. Freedom to live! With that the work he was destined to do would follow in its natural course. But what a tenuous film of chance lay between a man's possessing freedom of body and soul and his loss of both! It came to him as vividly as the new light over the wakening land that everything within him drew out of the hard and somber spirit of this northern earth and that his rebellion against it had been the folly of youth.

But it was too late now for such a discovery. There was but one thing left for him to do—decisively and without any sentimental maundering. He could not trust himself to set eyes again upon Ashbrooke. It had been hard enough to remain silent after that Goldy Matthews affair and to permit Ashbrooke to think that his secret had been sealed by death. Perhaps, Royce realized now, he had been a coward in not demanding the truth from Ashbrooke then. But he had faltered there until it was too late. What Teresa had revealed last night, however, was more than he could bear. To face Ashbrooke now, to ask him for the truth, was unthinkable. Even if Teresa was lying. If she wasn't—He pressed his hands hard against his eyes and got up.

No more could he think of meeting Jo Porte again. It was madness that had taken possession of him last night when he had found her in the tower room, some vague sense of wreaking vengeance upon a world that had proven faithless. She knew it then—as she knew it later when she had left

him without a word. He would never be able to convince her now that he really loved her as he had loved no woman before.

Ashbrooke and Jo Porte—one seemed to complement the other in his mind after last night's events. Teresa, to the very end, had had her capricious, destructive way with him.

There was but one thing left for him to do—he must leave Sky Valley at once and never return.

Chapter Five

1

Along ragged waysides the wild rose was whitening in the midsummer heat, petals falling dry and pale in the coarse, dust-tangled grasses. But the yellow spurs of wild indigo, the tough, tall spikes of blue vervain, and that dainty pest, Queen Anne's lace, towered up in insolent vigor above the withered beauty of the rose. Waste places were aflame with butterfly weed and tiger lily, and in dried swamp beds a faint vapor floated upward from the purple seas of milkweed in bloom and vanished in the long ripples of white air. A scant rain had barely penetrated the top soil before another hot spell had settled down for a baking siege, and now the common talk of drought had become a matter more of ominous silences and fearfully exchanged glances than of words. The western and southern states had suffered appalling ravages of wind and heat, and it seemed not unlikely that some such visitation should reach even this fringe of the northern forests.

People spoke with almost bated breath now of the vast, once fertile plains that lay toward the sunset, plains that might conceivably never be turned again by the plow. And the environs of Carthia quivered with a new, jealous protectiveness toward the wooded lands which were a stout and vital barrier against that sinister force out of the arid west.

But among the small farmers around Fallen Star Lake that period of tense apprehensiveness had already passed over. It had passed because another blow had fallen upon them; and ruin, unless they abandoned their farmsteads, stared at them across the distance of a few years.

Royce Hilyard had suddenly disappeared in his car from Sky Valley and not even his brother Ashbrooke knew where he had gone. There was much irrelevant conjecture about his vanishing; it was inevitable that it should be linked with Teresa's return to Carthia, although she had remained only a few days and it was not known whether she had seen Royce or not. But before the end of the month gossip about Royce and his former wife was forgotten in the staggering news that swept the countryside.

The first intimation of it had come to Jo Porte three days after Royce left. On an afternoon that was warm and dreamlike with the gossamer of milkweed drifting, Brade Toufang and Charlie Vandermeyer had driven up to the Portes' in Toufang's lumber wagon, two of Brade's grandchildren in the back seated on some sacks of feed. Jo called the children into the house and offered them raspberry soda. Raspberry soda was diluted raspberry juice with vinegar and sugar added and a little soda stirred into it. While it spanked smartly into their noses, Jo watched them and listened to the conversation between her father and the men on the porch.

"It was sure enough Ash we seen up there behind the community hall today with them two scouts from the Wildwood Lumber Company. They went away in their car before we got close enough to ask 'em what they was up to, but I'll lay to it Ash is gettin' busy on the timber, now that Royce is gone."

"I used to think it was safe enough as long as Royce was around," Charlie Vandermeyer said. "But if Ash gets loose on that stuff it will be the finish of this neck of the woods. We might as well move out."

Jo listened as long as she could, then went to her room and seated herself on the bed. She plucked at the white crocheted coverlet with agitated fingers. After all these years of sheltering the humble little farms, was the forest that stood dark and warm on their margins to be stripped from the earth? No, no, that couldn't be! Royce would never have let it be!

She lay back on the bed and stared at the ceiling with its rude whitewashed beams. Now that the destruction of the woodland she had known all her life seemed more than a remote possibility, its secret ways, its sweet, wild mysteries, drew upon her in vivid pain. The savage Owl Country in moon and snow, with the eyes of deer shining and then gone like ghost lights; the regal expanse of virgin pine north of Baggott's, where ages slumbered in a silence too deep and shadowed for the mind to know; the wide stretch of second growth tamarack and spruce and jack pine east of the cranberry bog, struggling to reach the noble heights of their ancestors—she thought of these and of the multitudinous life of the wilderness they cherished. It was not only that existence here would become harsh and barren for any human soul. The trees themselves, the birds in their branches, and the timid, gliding wild things in their shade—no, the talk of the men was without reason. Such a thing could never be!

When she heard Brade call to the children and tell them he was ready to go home, Jo could scarcely bring herself to go out and bid them good-by.

2

By the middle of June it was definitely known that the Wildwood Lumber Company would begin at once to lay waste the Hilyard tract. The destruction would be complete—not only would the big trees go, but the smaller growth would be indiscriminately slashed down and turned into pulpwood. It was estimated that by the end of the summer the western and northern shores of Fallen Star Lake, with the exception of the sparsely timbered patches on the small farms, would be a stark desolation of stumps.

Nothing, it seemed, could be done to stop the havoc. Impromptu indignation meetings were held in the community hall, but protests were futile. Charlie Vandermeyer sought legal advice in Carthia and was told that he would be wasting time fighting a company that had already paid for the right to cut the timber and take it out of the district. When Brade Toufang hinted that the farmers might resort to direct action and run the loggers out of the woods, he was warned that any such movement would be frowned upon by the authorities and met with whatever force the state saw fit to bring into the argument. They were beaten.

Their common gloom bound the settlers together more closely than they had ever been before. Sarah Toufang and Dora Vandermeyer forgot the coolness that had existed between them ever since the day of the Hilyard sale, and Dora consigned to the barn loft the drop-leaf table which had been their peculiar bone of contention. Old Mrs. Vandermeyer began to lament that she would be buried in alien ground, and Mrs. Dibney declared that George had bought his land from the Hilyards against her better judgment. It was not so serious, perhaps, for the Torkelsons and the Matthewses and the Broatches—they were still tenants and could move to Canada, if necessary, and take their effects with them.

Old Phineas Baggott alone held aloof. With the exception of Jo Porte, he would admit no one within his gate. After one or two visits early in the summer, Jo herself was filled with qualms concerning the old hermit. He pretended to know nothing of what was going on about him. He refused even to speak of the trees that were crashing to earth within a quarter of a mile of his retreat.

In time Jo had no real concern for what was happening. Royce had gone from her of his own choice after that night at Sky Valley. *She* had driven him away; *she* had brought disaster upon the countryside. After years of loving him in secret, her one act of love had ended in defeat. Even Royce Hilyard

had been sorry—he had said he was sorry—for an occurrence that was casual in his life, but of supreme importance in her own. She remembered again the nest of rabbits among the mullein stalks at Easter when she had been only fourteen. All nature had conspired against her from the first. She might have known! There could be nothing grave now, nothing living and true. Not even the anxiety of the neighbors, not even the queerness of Phineas Baggott, although she felt through him a brief shock of meaningless fear.

It was all one now in her own sense of failure.

3

On a July evening, after she had seen the lumber camps in full swing for miles around, Jo drove home and left the sighing car in the yard. Her father had gone to Carthia with Lute Billings and had not yet come home. She walked westward from the house to the little swamp hollow that lay a hundred yards or so from the shore ridge. From a stone above the nearly dry pocket of ground she watched the pale sparks of fireflies darting over the still faintly rosy glow of the marsh pinks, over laced reeds and grasses, and the occasional spire of steeplebush. She could remember when this hollow was full of cattails and ribbon grass and—in the deep, golden brown water at its heart—globed cow lilies.

Back of her where the pines were so dense that no underbrush had taken root and where the ground was even now moldy and damp from ages of secret darkness, Indian pipe grew in ghostly, delicate denial of any force at work to extinguish its waxen beauty. She had pulled up two or three of the clammy parasites as she passed through the woods, and now she stared down at them lying in her hand and tried to fix her mind upon this curious tenaciousness of a plant that bloomed only out of a myriad of other tiny deaths. She strove hardily to think of anything away from her own unhappiness, but the end was that she threw herself face downward on the ground and wept until all the strength seemed drained out of her body.

The dull, humiliating truth had long since become to her a thing too familiar for either laughter or tears. She had known from the instant Royce had entered the tower room that evening that his coming to her was only a perverse and savage venging of himself upon the forces that had thwarted and made a fool of him. And yet, knowing, she had been defenseless against

her own overmastering love for him. But her love, given so unreservedly, had sent him away from her in self-loathing. He had gone away—afraid, perhaps, that if he stayed she would assert some claim upon him. It was for that she wept.

She sat up, wiped her face on the hem of her skirt, and heard the voices of her father and Lute Billings coming clearly across the stillness. Only last night Ernest had spoken of selling out here for anything he could get and joining Lute on his chicken ranch. This would be a cheerless place now, he had said resignedly, with the hills bare and the hollows baked dry and the wild life fled from the country. Well, Jo thought, that would at least mean freedom for herself, freedom to go her own way alone. They could manage without her.

While she walked slowly back to the house a sense of forlorn loneliness, of being unwanted and unneeded, swept her intolerably. But this was self-pity of the most ignoble sort, she told herself in sudden anger. If she had any pride at all, she would not permit her experience with Royce Hilyard to distort her life, to confuse and weaken her own identity. She was still Jo Porte. She could walk alone, as she had done through all the years of her ill-starred love. Sometime—at long last—that love would die, too, as any untended thing must die. Then she would be truly free. She looked down at the ghost flowers she still carried in her hand; they were limp, slimy, disgusting things now. She had been scarcely aware that she still held them. She threw them from her.

Her father and Lute Billings sat on the porch in animated conversation.

"Royce Hilyard's comin' back," Ernest said, not looking up at her, and unnecessarily putting a match to his pipe.

For a barely perceptible instant Jo stood still; then she went over and sat down beside the porch table, her back to the fading light.

"That ought to make everybody around here happy," she said sarcastically. "I suppose he'll go to work now putting the timber all back again."

"Well," her father smiled, "he can't likely do that, even if he *is* a Hilyard. Once a tree is down she lies awful low."

"How do you know he's coming back?"

"We saw Seth in town," Lute told her. "Seems Royce sent for some books he wanted an' Seth got old Doc Murdoch to write him about what

Ash was doin' here since he left. Royce wired he was comin' home at once and to tell Ash to do nothing more till he got here."

"He can't do much more than he's done already," Ernest said.

"When is he coming back?" Jo asked.

"Seth says he ought to be up tonight or tomorrow."

"Don't matter when he comes," Ernest said. "Besides, Ash is on a fishin' trip up to the Arrowhead. All tuckered out from hard work, I reckon!"

Jo's mouth tightened bitterly. "Damn him!" Her voice was thick with a soft, poisonous hatred. "Damn them both to hell!"

"Tut, tut, Jo! No use *your* gettin' yourself all worked up over it," her father advised dispassionately. "We got nothin' to worry about—nothin' much, anyhow. Lute and me came to an agreement tonight. After harvest we're movin' down to Lute's place and raise chickens for a spell. 'Tain't like as if we had to go look for another place to start in again—like the Matthewses and the Torkelsons. I wouldn't want to try that at my age."

"Are they really going to leave, then?" Jo asked.

There had been some talk of it during the last week or two.

"Seth says they're gettin' out by the end o' the week. There won't be anything left on this side o' the lake for anybody. Give us a couple o' dry seasons like this one—and a few days o' wind, now that the trees are down, and there won't be enough black mold to grow a head o' lettuce."

Jo gave a burst of hard laughter and her father glanced at her anxiously. "Well—what's—"

"Let's go out somewhere and dance, Lute!" she said suddenly, and went into the house.

"O.K.!" he replied, and looked after her wonderingly, skeptically.

In the kitchen she washed her hands and face, combed her hair, then went into her bedroom. It *was* funny, she said to herself, when you really looked at it. If she had not gone across to Sky Valley with the cake on the evening of the first of May, if Seth had not asked her to stay and set the house in order, if she had gone home as soon as she was through instead of seating herself on the floor of the tower room with old Ashbrooke Hilyard's books—if, in short, she had not taken that one hour of happiness, some thousand acres of forest might still be standing and the livelihood of many

humble people might still be secure. With Royce at Sky Valley, Ashbrooke would never have spread ruin in the woodlands about Fallen Star Lake.

A little while later, in Lute Billings' car, she suddenly changed her mind about going anywhere to dance. She had not really wanted to dance in the first place, she thought contritely. Lute, who danced like a fervent ox and yet loved it, was disappointed—and bewildered.

"O.K., Jo," he said patiently. "Anything is all right with me. We could go to Pilmer and see a movie." He looked prudently at his watch. "We'd get there in the middle of the show, but—"

"I'd rather not," Jo said hastily. "It'd be hot—and I don't want to be shut in tonight. I feel as if I couldn't bear it. Besides, I watered the garden today until my back almost cracked. I'd rather just drive around a little and get to bed fairly early."

Lute, never garrulous, was ominously quiet. Seated beside him, Jo felt in his silence something of his old ponderous and inarticulate yearning toward her.

When they drove home at last Lute stopped his car a little distance from the house. The house was in darkness. The humid July night was dark with another false threat of rain, heat lightning skulking low on the horizon.

"Listen, Jo," Lute said, in his voice a blunt, kindly sort of masterfulness. "I've been thinkin' things out lately. Now that your dad is comin' in with me —don't you think you and I could make a go of it together? I know I'm not much your kind. I don't read many books or anything, and I never had any schoolin' to speak of. But we've been good friends, haven't we? We've always liked each other. Maybe you'd get to—well, maybe you'd get to like me more after we got married." He cleared his throat on the word. It embarrassed him, Jo perceived with a smile of pity.

A tenderness toward him, a bleak gratitude for his simple, almost reverent devotion through this long time, overcame her to the point of tears. She put out her hand and grasped his roughened one.

"You're so good, Lute—so darned good!"

He gave a stout exclamation of protest. "Me? I'm no account. You're worth ten o' me!" A shy, apologetic frown came upon his face in the light from the instrument board as he bent closer to her. "I got lots o' mean streaks in me. There was a while there, when you used to go over to the Hilyard place—I was scared you might be—well, you know—sort o' sweet on Royce. It used to kind o' get me once in a while. It wasn't any o' my

business, I know. And I was probably all cockeyed about it. But I'm forgettin' all that now, Jo. As long as you're the same girl you were before, I'll always want you."

He made as if to put his arm about her, but Jo leaned back hard against the door of the car. A horrible feeling of hysterical laughter was bubbling up from deep within her.

"No, no, Lute!" she said breathlessly. "I'm not—you see—I'm not—" she caught herself up in desperation—"I'm not in love with you, Lute. I like you—you know I do. But I couldn't marry anyone I didn't really love. It wouldn't be fair." Her speech seemed to be rushing headlong into a blind chaos of words. "I don't want to be married. When Dad leaves here and goes in with you—I'm going to do something else. I—Laura Keefe has asked me to—"

Lute was looking at her strangely. Terror of him, of his dawning, coldly yellowed look, froze the words on her lips. She groped for the handle of the car door, opened it, and stepped down from the car.

"I'd better go in, Lute," she said rapidly, then leaned toward him. "Some day you'll meet someone who'll feel toward you—the way you deserve."

"Was I right, then, about Royce Hilyard?" he asked suddenly.

She looked at him steadily. "Please don't ask me that, Lute! There's nothing I can tell you."

"I guess I talked out o' turn there," he said as if to himself.

"Good night, Lute. You don't need to bother coming in with me. Dad's in bed."

She ran through the heavy darkness to the house, let herself in with trembling fingers, and then stood for a long time leaning against the closed door and scarcely breathing. At last she heard Lute's car drive away.

Chapter Six

1

Seth Hornblow, hearing Royce's car drive into the yard, came up reluctantly from the big barn. He knew where Royce had been all afternoon —knew what he had seen around those bustling camps of the Wildwood Lumber Company. Seth would have preferred to slink away into the woods and stay there forever rather than face Royce Hilyard now.

"Any word?" Royce asked as soon as Seth came up to him.

"No. I been listenin' for a phone call, but—"

"I'll go in and ring the telegraph office again," Royce said with a quiet that Seth shrank from.

"Ash is probably out at some camp, like I said, where they can't get him. There's a—"

"Never mind," Royce interrupted with brusque impatience. "You're sure he said he'd be back tomorrow?"

"Right enough—that's what he said."

"Well, it doesn't matter much." Royce took off his hat and ran his hand mechanically across his moist forehead. "They're certainly tearing hell out of the country over there on the north side." His mouth twitched and Seth knew he was talking only to himself. "I think I'll call again and see if there's any word."

Seth watched him go into the house and come out again almost at once. He knew from his face that there was still no reply from Ashbrooke at the telegraph office.

"I'm going to drop over and see Torkelson and Tom Matthews. Charlie Vandermeyer says they're getting ready to leave. Keep an ear cocked for the phone, will you?"

"I'll be here, don't worry."

Seth watched him get into his car and drive away through the dusty, scorched gold of the declining sun. In his heart he felt it would be better if Ashbrooke never came back to Sky Valley Farm.

2

Royce looked straight ahead, unmoved now, as he passed the lumber camp on the edge of the Owl Country. . . . Dim region of bog and ravine where he himself had been lost one afternoon so long ago that he could remember little of it now. . . . Goldy Matthews, snugly, safely dead, cradled in winter twilight. . . . Neal Whitman, his body curiously toppling over in the foggy, cold blaze of an autumn dawn. . . . And now, those places ripped open, rotting stumps surrounding them! It didn't make sense. Nothing made sense.

He came with an odd suddenness, it seemed, to the already denuded margin of the land that had been rented by Tom Matthews. He drew to the side of the road and looked ahead at the sadly picturesque and motley caravan that stood waiting in the roadway, reaching back beyond the Matthews gate. Biting his lip, he got down from his car and walked up the dusty road until he came to the strangely assembled outfit that stood in the lead.

It was an ancient surrey that had long ago lost its fringed top, the paint on its woodwork dried and chipped by the suns of many summers. Perched on the high front seat was Peter Torkelson, his plump wife beside him, his three younger children on the seat behind. Peter's horses, Royce noted, looked well cared for, at least. A rope, strongly reinforced with wire, was tied about the rear axle, its other end fastened to a light wagon piled high with household furnishings, the load topped by a crate of chickens. Beyond waited Peter's two elder sons, boys of sixteen and eighteen, beside a wagon transport that carried a dozen panting sheep. Two docile cows were tethered behind the wagon, one on either side. A little farther along stood Tom Matthews' old Ford and its canvas-covered trailer on two wheels. Tom had sold what little livestock he had—for next to nothing, Charlie Vandermeyer had said today.

Royce halted beside Peter Torkelson. He stretched his hand up to him with a sick feeling that if Peter would be gracious enough to take it, he

would find it clammy. The man, smiling his gentle, whimsical smile, thrust out his own earth-worn hand.

"Are you really leaving, Peter?" Royce asked him from between stiff lips.

"Ve're started," Peter said. "Ve go now—v'en it's cool."

Royce was silent for a moment. There were no words to express what he felt. At last he said, "You don't think you could still make a go of it here? We could fix it so you'd not have to pay—"

Peter's laugh cut him short. "Dere's no fixin' dis." He swept his hand toward the ugly hillside behind the Matthews farm. "Ve are brush farmers, Royce. Ve plant yust so much ve can sell a little sometimes v'en ve need somet'ing. De rest ve get from de voods. But de voods go—so ve go! Dis land iss no good now in two, t'ree year. And dat ain't all, eder. Ve *like* de voods. Dis here—" he nodded his head toward the raw stumps that edged the roadside—"dis here iss a sore-eye!"

"I know," Royce said grimly. "Well, there isn't much for me to say, Peter. You probably understand that, don't you? It's all my fault. If I had stayed around here—"

"Sure," Peter interrupted, reddening and glancing sideways at his wife, who sat implacably staring out into the glare of the setting sun. "Ve don't hold not'ing against you, Royce. Ve take it so ve find it. Up nort' ve start all over again."

Royce could find no adequate response to the simple acceptance in Peter's words.

"Well, good luck to you, Peter!"

"Same here," Peter replied wholeheartedly.

Royce walked back to the Matthews' gate. Old Tom was coming down from the slab house among the pines. Mrs. Matthews and the son Henry were standing at the gate, talking with the neighbors who had come to bid them good-by. The Vandermeyers were there and the Toufangs and the Dibneys. Ernest Porte was busy drawing tighter a rope that bound the load on Tom Matthews' trailer. Royce glanced quickly about for some sign of Jo. But she was not one of the group. He looked back and saw her walking along the other side of the road, toward the Torkelson surrey. She had seen him, he thought with painful chagrin, and had gone directly away from the others to avoid him.

The faces that turned toward him now were a study in varying expressions, but a resigned indifference seemed to hold them all. If there were only a single, disinterested smile in the group, Royce thought miserably, but the blandly innocent, inquiring look on the face of Ernest Porte came closer to it than any.

"So you're bent on leaving, Tom," Royce said when Matthews had come through the gate. He could think of nothing else to say.

Old Tom shrugged. "We're burnt out now, what with the drooth an' all. A brother of mine has land in Wisconsin—an' a herd o' Jerseys. He's been wantin' me to go in with him for the last five years. I might as well now."

"I'm glad you have something to go to, anyhow," Royce said.

"Well, it ain't much, but it'll do. And there ain't much to stay here for now. Ma an' I liked it, but—we're gettin' old and—and there's Henry, of course. We got to give him a chance—not but what he'll make out some way, I guess."

"He'll make out, all right," Royce said, and tried to smile hearteningly at the strapping, stern-faced youth who leaned against the fence rail. It had been Henry's intention to take over his father's farm and buy it as soon as there was money enough. Henry had a girl in Pilmer—a shy little thing, with broad, capable hands, Royce recalled. Well, they'd make out—somehow.

"Just the same, I don't like leavin' here," Tom said. "No place'll ever seem like—well, like home, any more. A lot of things can happen around a shack in the woods—in twenty-five years or more."

"I wish—" Royce began, then checked himself. What was the sense in talking about it! "If there was anything I could do," he went on lamely, "but—there's nothing. I'm licked. You can start over again, somewhere else. I'd like to go with you—I would, honestly!"

They all looked at him with changed, puzzled eyes. Old Mrs. Vandermeyer's white head bristled belligerently.

"That's fine talk—fine talk comin' from you, Royce Hilyard! There ain't much of the old blood left in your veins—old Ash Hilyard's blood, I mean—or you'd be ashamed of what you're sayin'. And so you ought to be—downright ashamed! Old Ash was never the one to lay down when he was licked. He just wouldn't *be* licked. And we're not all dead yet, thank the Lord. The Vandermeyers are stayin' where they are, woods or no woods. You get back to your own farm, Royce Hilyard, that's the thing for you to do. There's trees there, ain't there? Get back—and send that no-good brother

of yours packin'—and then get to work! Far as I've ever heard hard work never killed anybody, man or woman. And it won't kill you. You'll be kind o' late startin', but you can do a good job of it yet if you set your mind to it. That's my idea an' I don't care who knows about it!"

Beads of perspiration gathered in a large drop on the old woman's outthrust chin. Her neighbors, standing about, laughed to hide their embarrassment.

"That's tellin' him off, Gran'ma!" Brade Toufang bellowed. "The Toufangs is stayin' too—the whole litter of 'em—stayin' till the damn lake dries up!"

Royce was too distraught for a moment to speak. He looked at the ground, his lips moving hard across his teeth.

"But the Broatches say they're going away, too, Granny, as soon as they get their melons and tomatoes sold," Fred Vandermeyer's ten-year-old sprite piped up in a reedy voice.

"You hold your tongue till you're spoken to!" the old lady said testily to her great-granddaughter.

Charlie Vandermeyer spoke up then, with heavy politeness, assuring Royce that they did not hold it against him that this mischance had befallen them.

Royce felt that he must say something—he couldn't stand here like a dolt.

"How far do you expect to go tonight?" he asked Tom Matthews.

"Well, we figure on gettin' north as far as Hole-in-the-Sky Lake—along about midnight—an' campin' out with the Torkelsons, just for a sort of good-by. No tellin' when we'll ever meet again—if we ever do."

His simple statement was almost more than Royce could bear. Setting his face in a stony smile, he offered his hand to Tom Matthews. Tom grasped it hurriedly, glancing aside in confusion.

"Well—I guess we better get goin'. Henry, you be careful now, gettin' ahead o' Torkelson's outfit. Don't push him. Peter should 'a' stayed back of us." He gave Royce a wizened smile. "Seems like we can't do anything the way we ought to—comin' or goin'."

He waved his hand in farewell and climbed into the car beside his son. Mrs. Matthews was already in the back seat, bedding and luggage piled high

beside her.

Royce walked back rapidly to his car, drawn halfway into the shallow, grassy ditch, and seated himself on the running board to wait for the caravan to pass. Tom Matthews signaled to Peter Torkelson, and in a few moments the oddly assorted procession was on its way.

Jo, only a few feet away, saw Royce get up and stand with his arms crossed before him, his face an unreadable mask. She turned and looked again toward the lurching, awkward cavalcade as it descended under birches down a gentle hill slope. There was an opening in the trees, and just before each rig slipped down into shadow the rays of the vanishing, blood-red sun brushed the upper outlines of canvas dome and clumsy van into wild and incandescent relief. It touched for that instant of passage the tips of the horses' ears and made the cows' horns briefly winking tapers. It changed the march into something fantastic and incorporeal, out of time and space, a mirage in a fleeting dream.

Royce stood silent, his throat tightening harshly. When he glanced aside he could see only Jo's lifted proud profile, her mouth tense and immobile. It was not until the Matthews trailer vanished from sight around a bend in the road that Royce spoke.

"There are things you never forget," he said, his tone roughened. "And for me—this will be one of them."

Jo turned deliberately and looked at him with dry, too bright eyes. Her smile flickered disdainfully. Then she glanced with a cold, blank gaze toward the Matthews gate, where only her father and George Dibney stood talking, the others gone.

"Jo," Royce pleaded, "don't go—just yet. I must talk to you. I've been in absolute hell ever since—"

"Dad is waiting for me," she said shortly, and walked away, her slim back straight and cool, infinitely expressive.

3

Phineas Baggott's fanatical opposition to the advent of the camps had asserted itself only in small and spiteful ways. His mischief making—a stealthy midnight foray on one place where he had poured kerosene over a

half dozen crates of fresh provisions and a visit to another where he had ruined a new circular saw—had been designed merely to exasperate and enrage. Not until he had had his chuckling fill of their annoyance and discomfort in petty ways did he intend to take his supreme, ferociously sweet revenge. Through these weeks he had bided his time, knowing that his hour of triumph would come. His movements had been too cunning to leave anything that would betray him.

But on the night after the departure of the Torkelsons and the Matthewses—a night that was still and as black as rich loam—six fires sprang up in the bone-dry timber within an area of two square miles—and all within the incredibly short period of one hour. Four of the outbreaks the timber crews themselves put under control, but the plumed red fury of the other two defied the desperate efforts of fifty men—fire rangers from Pilmer and Carthia and every available man in the district. It was only in the early morning, when the first rain of many weeks poured suddenly down in a solid, drowning avalanche, that the malevolent torches shrank to embers against the sky and at last smoldered out in an acrid reek that would hang in the air for days.

And yet, although suspicion converged from all sides upon the squat stone house of Phineas Baggott, there was no evidence that the old man had been beyond his own sagging gate that night. When two rangers and a foreman from the nearest camp burst in upon him after the fires were halted, he was seated innocently beside a sour peat fire in his kitchen, reading a rusty brown Bible.

The men were abashed.

“You were almost burned out last night, Phineas,” one of the rangers told him. “Do you know that?”

“It looked serious,” he agreed mildly. “I sat here reading my favorite psalms.” He held up the Bible. “There’s a comfort to be had still from this book. There’s music in some of the lines that can’t be—”

“Don’t you think it’s time you were moving out of here—before you’re burned out?” the ranger interrupted.

“Me?” Phineas regarded him curiously. “I’ve lived here too long to be afraid of anything like that. No, I have no intention of moving. All my friends are around me here. While they stay—”

“Your friends are going. Some of them left last night and it won’t be long before you’re left alone.”

Phineas smiled. “My friends? No—they’re still here. You don’t know any of them. But I know them.”

The three men exchanged glances and muttered quietly among themselves.

Phineas looked up at them. “It’ll do you no good to plot against me. Anyone who tries to meddle in my affairs will find me waiting for him—and prepared. You’d better be about your business.”

The men left, obviously disgruntled. The old man followed them into the yard and stood beside the shed that housed his dogs. Presently he clenched both hands and raised them toward the heavens, his grizzled face lifted in the rain.

“Judge of all things—be the judge!” he said aloud, and let his hands fall slowly to his sides.

Then, going to the shed, he led his dogs out one by one and put them in the house. When he was done he went in and closed the door. He poked at the smoldering fire for a moment, then took the rusty brown book into his hands and sat down.

4

It was early in the afternoon when Ashbrooke Hilyard arrived in Carthia. He had found Royce’s telegram awaiting him when he had come out from the hunting lodge where he had been for the past week. He was in no hurry to drive out to Sky Valley. It was still drizzling a little, and he could easily guess the state of mind Royce must have been in when he had wired him to come back immediately.

He went directly to the office of the Wildwood Lumber Company, thinking to stave off for an hour or so the irksome scene he would have to bear with as soon as he put in an appearance at the farm. Royce could be so tediously idealistic, and at the most inconvenient times! Putting on that vanishing act, the day after Teresa’s visit! Sheer melodrama, nothing else. Even Teresa had laughed when she heard about it. And now, coming back in a noble rage just because something had been done—the only thing that could be done, in fact—to ease the burden under which they both were staggering. Half the money from the transaction was deposited in Royce’s account in the bank, thank the Lord! At least he could not accuse Ashbrooke

of trying to defraud him of his rightful share. Nearly five thousand dollars! If he wanted to become indignant at that, let him. Not in three years had Ashbrooke had so reasonable an offer for the timber. He had, he considered, used the power of attorney Royce had given him to the best possible effect.

Disturbing news, however, awaited him in the office of the lumber company. A number of fires had broken out in the timber tract during the night and two of them had done considerable damage before the rain set in. There could be no doubt that the fires had been set maliciously and old Phineas Baggott was suspected as the incendiary. It was time the old pest was made to move, anyhow. One of the company's foremen and two rangers had gone to see him early this morning and had been told to get out—threatened, even. Ashbrooke would have to do something about it. They had already spoken to Royce, but he had refused to take any action.

Ashbrooke left the office in a whipped-up fury that was somehow pleasant. Here, at least, was something to do. It would offset the uneasiness he felt at the thought of having to meet Royce. By the time he drove in through the still moist, freshened elms to Sky Valley, he felt securely bolstered against any argument Royce could possibly give him. In fact, he would attend to Baggott first and talk to Royce afterwards. The rain had ceased, but the roads around the lake would be heavy after the downpour. It would be better to leave the car at the farm and ride over on the mare. He would go directly upstairs, change to riding clothes, go straight to Baggott's molehill and order him to get out. They had been altogether too generous with the dangerous old fool. He should have been put away long ago.

There was nobody in the house when he entered. He went upstairs, got into breeches, boots, and shirt, and came down again, the mood of righteous wrath still upon him. In the yard outside he met Seth Hornblow. Seth wore a strangely scared look, but Ashbrooke was too impatient to heed it.

"Saddle the mare for me, Seth," he ordered peremptorily. "I'm going to ride over to see old Baggott. He's been setting fires in—"

Royce came from around the corner of the house. His face had a still, contemplative expression.

"Hello, Ash," he greeted him steadily. "Did you get my wire?"

Ashbrooke's features worked in suppressed resentment. He had hoped to get away before Royce appeared. Recovering himself quickly, he forced a smile, stepped forward and clapped his brother on the shoulder. Royce stood

immovable—like a deceptively amiable rock, Ashbrooke thought swiftly. But that was nothing to be alarmed about.

"Sure, I got your wire," he replied carelessly. "And I came down right away. How are you, anyhow?"

"I'm all right."

"That was a swell trick you pulled. What the hell was the idea in lighting out like that? If you hadn't told Seth not to worry about you I'd have had the police out. Where did you go?"

"We can talk about all that later," Royce said in the same composed tone. "There are other things—" He glanced toward the barn, where Seth was busy. "Come into the house. I want to have a talk with you."

Ashbrooke didn't like the mood behind those simple words. He laughed derisively.

"We can talk here, can't we—if there's anything to talk about?"

"You think there's nothing to talk about?"

Ashbrooke smiled. "You want to know all about this timber deal, of course. Let it wait, can't you? I've got to ride over to—"

"I'd rather not wait if it's all the same to you. How much of the timber have you let those fellows have?"

"Two sections."

"What did you get for it?"

Ashbrooke told him. "And that's tops these days. I worked on it from every angle—state park, summer resorts, everything. Besides, it was a cash proposition and half of it is in your—"

"Never mind that just now," Royce retorted quietly. "You knew what my position was about that timber."

Ashbrooke waved his hand wearily. "Don't talk like old Grandpap!"

"The Hilyards have held that timber for half a century, Ash," Royce reminded him.

"They could afford to hold it."

"And we could afford to hold it. Seth and I have been getting by in spite of conditions. We paid the taxes last year and we could have met them this year. You sold that stuff because *you* had to have more money, didn't you?

And you didn't give a damn about what happened to these people who have been counting on us. If you had insisted on decent logging operations, at least, and left enough standing timber to protect the land, it wouldn't have been so bad. But you didn't give a damn about the land. Isn't that true?"

Ashbrooke's patience was vanishing. "You know why I sold it. We were both up against it. I believed I was doing the best thing for you as well as for myself."

"Look here, Ash—you're my brother. You're all I have left out of a rotten mess. I've been thinking over a few things that we'll have to clear up between us, but they can wait. I want to settle everything decently—and go on from here. But you've got to come clean. You sold the timber to get yourself out of a jam, didn't you? And you knew I never would have consented to any such proposition. You know I wouldn't have given you power of attorney if I had had any idea you would use it to sell the trees. You knew that, so you put it over when I wasn't here to stop you. You—"

"Why the hell didn't you stay on the job, then?"

Royce fought down his sudden anger. "I'll tell you all about that later, Ash. If we're going to go on from here we're going to start from scratch and forget what's past. That's the way I want it. But we're going to start together. You're coming in with me. You're going to quit that job of yours in town and come back here and go to work with me till we get things back where they were. I'm serious about this, Ash. What do you say?"

Ashbrooke drew back a step. "Get me back on the farm? You're crazy! I'm not going to stand here talking about any crack-brained scheme of that kind. Anyhow, I've got to go over to Baggott's just now and—"

"What for?"

"The old fool has been setting fires. Isn't that reason enough? He's got to be put out of there before he burns the whole—"

"Is that our business? Let them look after their own timber. It's theirs now, isn't it?"

"I promised to go over there this afternoon."

Royce suddenly went pale. "You're not going!"

Ashbrooke's smile was not pleasant. "So the elder brother is giving orders, eh? Well—try stopping me!"

He turned away, then put up a frantic hand to ward off the blow, but he was too late. Royce struck him fairly on the loosened jaw, sent him backwards against the wall of the house, his hands clawing out ludicrously at the stone work before he sank into a half-stunned heap.

"You made me do it!" Royce cried, his face a livid gray and red, his throat and temples swollen. Again: "You made me do it! I've put up with everything—you and Goldy Matthews—you and Teresa! I was a coward. I didn't give a cheap damn about it anyhow. But—oh, my God! Get up, Ash—get up and come into the house."

He was pleading now. Ashbrooke scrambled dizzily to his feet, glaring blindly about him. His eyes focused now in red fury upon Royce's face.

"So—you knew about it—knew it all the time. Or maybe your wife—the little bitch!—maybe she told you. And you—you gutless—"

Suddenly inarticulate with rage, he struck out savagely. With a gasp of pain Royce reeled backwards and drew his hand across his parted lips.

Seth had left the mare saddled in the yard and came running now to throw himself between them. "Stop this—you fools! Stop, I tell you!"

Ashbrooke turned quickly and started away.

"Don't let him go, Seth!" Royce yelled, staggering after his brother.

But Ashbrooke was in the saddle and the mare's spirited hoofs were throwing out little clods of dirt right and left.

5

Phineas Baggott was kneeling over a pansy bed in the shade of the lilac bushes. Faithfully, all through the searing heat, he had lugged water to thirsty bed and bush, but last night's rain had done for them what all his devotion could not do. There had been a skeptical aliveness about them before, as if they thought they were being hoodwinked into going on. But now the lilac leaves breathed out, wide and heart-shaped, and the pansies lifted pleased, lovely faces. So Phineas thought and, after a while of looking at them, started back toward the house. His dogs were setting up a clamor, a noise strong enough to cause Phineas to pause and listen.

A horse was coming at a fast gallop down the road from the south. He hurried to the house and stood waiting in the doorway.

Ashbrooke Hilyard drew up smartly before the door. The old man stood there, the very picture of guilelessness, as his visitor leaned from the saddle.

"Come over here, Phineas!"

"I'll stay where I am, I think," Phineas replied.

Ashbrooke smiled. The crafty devil, he thought, he knows what I'm here for. He kept his eyes on the old man's face. A feeling of unsteadiness still remained from his encounter with Royce, but he felt quite equal to the business in hand. He got down from the horse and strolled over toward the old man.

"I'm giving you twenty-four hours to get out of here," he said at once. "Pack up!"

Phineas looked at him for a moment before he replied. "So? It won't take me twenty-four hours to pack what I have. But who gave you authority to turn me out of a place that was left me—in perpetuity, so to speak?"

"I didn't come here to argue," Ashbrooke told him. "You've been setting fires in the timber."

He fixed a cold look upon the old man, but Baggott met his eyes with a gentle smile.

"And what of that?"

"Pack up and get out!" Ashbrooke retorted angrily. "If you're not out of here in twenty-four hours—"

"Let me warn you, young fellow—you're on my property now. A man's house is his castle."

"I've given you notice, Baggott," Ashbrooke replied, and stalked away. He was getting into his saddle when Phineas opened the door behind him and spoke a quiet command. Five darkish shapes flew out of the door silently and in less than five seconds met Ashbrooke's mare head on. She threw her splendid feet toward the clear day sky. She waltzed in a brave frenzy while the dogs tore upward at her throat, at her satiny withers. She stumbled and fell. She got up, galloped away free, her eyes a white terror.

But the dogs had no further interest in the mare. Ashbrooke Hilyard was on the ground.

6

It was Mrs. Dibney who carried the news to Jo Porte.

"Something dreadful has happened," she said as soon as she could get her breath. "I—I can't tell you, Jo!"

Jo spread her long fingers before her on the pine wood of the kitchen table.

"Don't carry on, now!" she said sharply. "There isn't anything I can't listen to after—Well, what is it?"

Mrs. Dibney began to sob hysterically, but Jo finally quieted her to coherent speech.

"George was out in the west cornfield," she managed to tell her at last. "He heard five shots—one right after the other—coming from over Baggott's way."

"Why—*I* heard them," Jo said. "I was out in the yard. I wondered . . ."

"You did? Well—George was afraid something was wrong, so he went over to Baggott's place right away—and there in the yard—" Her voice ceased suddenly. "I—I can't tell you, Jo."

"Will you stop this nonsense!" Jo ordered.

"It was—all five of Baggott's dogs were dead—chained to trees in the yard. And—" a long shudder raked Mrs. Dibney's thin body—"and Ashbrooke Hilyard—on the ground—dead, too! George said he scarcely knew Ashbrooke—the way the dogs left him."

A margin of cold sweat had formed on Jo's forehead at the roots of her hair. She clenched her teeth to still the noise of their chattering.

"Where was Phineas?" she asked, her voice like the tinkling of ice.

"You won't believe it, I know. He was cutting down a white birch in front of his house—as if nothing had happened. He didn't seem to see or hear George, even when he yelled at him. The tree came down, George said, with a kind of whistling sound. George said he knew Phineas had gone clean daffy. He didn't know what to do, but he asked the old man to come with him—and he did. He came away like a child. George brought him to our place and went and phoned the sheriff and told him what had happened. They came out—him and the coroner—and took Phineas away. George went

with them. They must have got Ashbrooke, too, because they went up that way when they left our place."

She began to cry again, but more quietly, in nervous release. Jo abstractedly patted her shoulder, but made no effort to stop her tears.

"How long is it since they—since they left?" she asked, staring before her into space.

"Oh—half an hour—no, more than that. Doesn't it look as if the whole place is cursed, Jo?" Mrs. Dibney whimpered. "I told George I wanted to get out—before something awful happens to us. You never can tell who'll be the next. Oh, I'm just sick—seeing old Baggott gave me an awful turn!"

It was almost more than Jo could do to keep her mind on what the woman was saying. "I think a cup of coffee will do you good." She got up with a numb feeling in her legs. "Go and lie down on the sofa there while I get it ready."

7

She recalled later that she made supper that evening as familiarly as she had ever done; that she talked calmly enough with her father about Ashbrooke Hilyard and Phineas Baggott, so that he could not know the wild confusion in her heart. She recalled that her decision had come when she went, finally, into her own room and stood, her fingers against her hot, dry lips, and looked down at the little cedar chest that Ernest had made for her so long ago.

She had no need to take that little, tenderly covered book out and read the lines again. She knew them too well. ". . . *The widest land doom takes to part us, leaves thy heart in mine with pulses that beat double. . . .*"

It was sunset before she went to Sky Valley. She walked the three miles with a hurry in her shoulders, her feelings strangely not unlike those she had known fourteen years ago. She walked past the lumber camp in the broken Owl Country, up across the darkening scroll of the hills and through the scrub oak region until, pale and ripe before her in the south, were the Hilyard fields. The rain had come in time to save the harvest there. Above the fields the stars stood sharper and more lonely in a wider solitude. You could almost hear the wheeling of the seasons over this land, Jo thought.

Royce was not in the house when she let herself quietly in through the door. But Seth was there in the kitchen, repairing the parts of a cream separator. His eyes had a bewildered, lost look. He did not want to talk, Jo could see, but even before she asked him he told her where Royce had gone.

She went out and walked through the yard, past the big barn and the silo and the smaller outbuildings.

He sat in the dusk on one of the grassy hummocks of the Stone Field, just beyond the fence. It had seemed to him the natural place somehow for him to go. Jo came and seated herself beside him, looked down over the evening land the way he was looking, his eyes steadfast and burningly clear. Without glancing toward her he groped for her hand. Her fingers closed about his, cool and firm.

"You *did* come," he said at last. "I was wondering what I'd do—without you."

She bent her head down against him, and his arm tightened with rough suddenness about her.

THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

[The end of *The Stone Field* by Martha Ostenso]