

The
MAD CAREWS
MARTHA OSTENSO



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THE
MAD CAREWS

BY

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AUTHOR OF

WILD GEESE and THE DARK DAWN



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To
MY BIG LITTLE BROTHERS
BARNEY AND BAMBY

CHAPTER I

Ghosts of centuries of sunlight crowded this August afternoon. Here was no single summer's day, dazzling the eyes, troubling the blood with its odors of drying, sweet and unexotic growth, but an æon of such days, spectral and lambent, in carnival on this prairie, on this flat and northern earth of Minnesota. Here eternity danced its static, vibrant dance of heat over the stubble, or floated in a gilded mote of dust down the ladder of sunlight thrust through the crack of a barn wall to the gloom and quiet within.

Elsa Bowers lay flat on her stomach in the doorway of the haymow, her eyes lost in the hot blue blur of the far horizon. Her bare legs waved fitfully in the air behind her, stretching out occasionally when the backs of her knees became hot and sticky. Yonder to the north—you could see the sharp steeple of the Methodist church and the shining tin roof of the big warehouse beside the railway—lay the little town of Sundower sprawled out sleepily under the hot afternoon. Far to the southward—you could just see the new wing that was being built to the big white house shining among the cottonwoods—was the Carew place, a vast reach of fertile acres that yielded their harvests to Seth Carew and his kin. Elsa had been to Sundower many times during the five summers since Steve Bowers, her easy-going father, had come north out of Iowa. She had been to the Carew place but once, when she had gone with her father, over a year ago, because of some business dealings he had had with Seth Carew and his younger brother, Peter. But then, it was only two years since the Carews had come to Sundower.

Elsa had been to the Carew place once—only once—but she had never forgotten the day. Who can forget the clear singing of saws and the ring of hammers in building, and the sharp, heady smell of new lumber, and the warm rose-pink of sunshine glowing through pine shavings, and the soft, smooth touch of a planed board when you lay your fingers along the grain, and man-talk and man-laughter coming to you over it all?

The Carews had been strangers to her then; they were strangers still. They had never ceased to be a fabulous family escaped from between the covers of a story book. Sometimes her mother, looking from the window toward the roadway going down to Sundower, would mention one of them. "There's Hildreth Carew—going to town with money in her pocket, I'll warrant!" Or her father, at the supper table: "Seth Carew bought a prize Hereford bull over to the Hurley fair today. Paid a price for him too, I'll bet!" Or perhaps it was Uncle Fred, talking to himself over his pipe in a

corner beside the stove: "I always said we're planted on the wrong side o' the hollow. The Carews knew what they were doin' when they took land on the south side. Trust *them!*" The Carews—strange people out of another world.

Sundower to the north and the Carew place to the south—and between them all the world that Elsa Bowers knew save for the vague memories of a farm in Iowa, memories that might have died long since had they not been kept alive by the fireside talk of her father, Steve Bowers, and her Uncle Fred. There, too, almost midway between the two remote but sunny limits of her own small world, lay Elder's Hollow and The Mountain. Elsa might have seen both hollow and mountain had she climbed to where the hay was piled against the other end of the loft and where there was a wide gap made by the fierce prairie wind when it had torn a weathered board from the gable of the barn, but Elsa had long ago decided there was little to be seen in that direction—and that little was gloomy enough, in all conscience.

The Hollow was nothing more than a shallow depression that stretched eastward through their own land and through Nate Brazell's as well, a full two miles of sloughs girt with wild rice and brittle reeds and swaying cat-tails, where the mallards spent clamorous nights in autumn and where now, in mid-August, a lonely bittern stalked in the mud and dipped his long beak for snails and water-bugs. Lately, it seemed, Uncle Fred Bowers had discovered that misfortune waited upon all who lived north of Elder's Hollow—unless, of course, you went as far as Sundower where the tin roof shone at noonday and where the steeple caught the red light from the sun at evening. But that, to be sure, was another matter.

Elsa Bowers, her eyes searching the glamorous distance, was convinced that Uncle Fred was right. Sooner or later, ill luck befell anyone who lingered about the Hollow, or sought a living on the side that lay toward Sundower. Had she not heard old Sarah Phillips declare to her mother that there was a "black curse" on the very ground itself? It was old Sarah Phillips, too, who had told of the time when a girl's body had been found in a shallow grave among the reeds on Nate Brazell's place. Elsa had heard that much herself, though she had been sent out of the house when her mother had found her listening in the doorway. That, of course, had happened years before Elsa's father had come to the district. It was within her own memory, however, that young Mortimer Lucas, the mayor's son, had been shot dead while hunting ducks in the Hollow with a companion from town. They had spoken openly of that incident, even when they knew she was listening. "The top of his head blown right off" was the way they had described it.

And hadn't two of their own heifers run blindly into the slough and sunk out of sight when they had tried to escape Nate Brazell's dogs? Sometimes, too, she had come upon her father and mother speaking in whispers about Fanny Ipsmiller, who had come to live in the house of Nels Lundquist, but she had long since learned that there were things going on in the world concerning which one never asked, if one were wise.

Then there was The Mountain, of course, rising from the southern edge of the hollow, as if the great hand that had scooped out the earth along those two miles of reeking bog had piled it in a neatly rounded dome where the sun was always brightest in summer, where a frail cloud of mist might be found clinging in the early mornings of autumn, where the thin wraiths of snow flung their shrouds about them in their winter dancing, and where the clean winds swept in the early spring when you went there to look for the first brave crocus-cups showing purple in their coats of fur.

When ill fortune threatened, Elsa's Good Spirit was wont to remind her that her father had had the wisdom to buy the land on which The Mountain stood when he had come to settle at Sundower. He insisted that the richest soil in the whole district was to be found on the gentle slopes of the mound. The crest he had allowed to go fallow for the sake of the cows, he said, who always found new green grass there in the spring long before the snow had disappeared from among the willows that skirted the creek by the house. When he had come to build, however, he chose the "wrong side" of the hollow. He argued with Uncle Fred that he would buy no land as long as he lived where there was not a bit of running water to cheer you in the evenings, and a curtain of trees to bring the birds about in summer, to say nothing of checking the wind in winter. But then, there was no telling what went on in his mind. Had he not told old Sarah Phillips that he had built the house in the hollow "to flout the devil"? And when she had asked him then why he had kept The Mountain and the land that lay south of the accursed spot—though it was well known that Seth Carew had tried to buy it—he had answered, "Why, to cheat the devil, of course!"

Elsa had long ago begun to fear that this double-dealing with the Evil One would come to no good in the end. It was this thought, precisely, that stood uppermost in her mind as she lay flat on her stomach in the doorway of the haymow and scanned the horizon half hidden in the summer haze. She was not thinking of the Carews and their fine white house with the new wing building, nor of Sundower, either, though her eyes watched curiously a gray drift of dust that approached slowly along the road leading southward from town. She was thinking of her brother, Rutherford—"Reef," they called him

—who was lying up there in the bed under the sloping eaves of the house. She shut her eyes tight and tried to imagine what he was feeling, but she was only ten years old and the one hurt she had ever felt was the hurt of a nail she had got in her heel once when she had gone wading in the slough in spring.

What puzzled Elsa now was that Reef should have been chosen to bear misfortune for the whole family and all the others have gone unharmed. Reef, who was so smart—Reef, who had helped his father shingle the very roof under which he now lay—Reef, who had carved his initials only yesterday on the sill on the haymow doorway, just where she could trace them with her finger! And he had put the date there, too—August 8, 1909. He had permitted her to start each one of the figures in the date and had laughed at her and taken his knife away when her hand had slipped on the difficult curves. They had talked, too, about other things while Elsa lay watching him guide his knife with infinite patience: of how Reef would grow up and become a lawyer, perhaps, like the mayor of Sundower, and have money to spend, like the Carews, and of how he would keep the farm and grow lilac bushes and honeysuckle and more cottonwood, because their mother had wished for such things about the place and had often said so, and of how he would see to it that she would never have to move again as long as she lived.

Reef was so smart—he could do everything! But what would he do now? Doctor Olson from Sundower had given him something to make him sleep. What if he never woke up again? Besides, couldn't you dream a pain? You dreamt of other things, like being afraid of the dark when you had to go out before you went to bed and both Reef and young Leon were bored with accompanying you. Elsa was sure that he dreamt of the pain. She had crept upstairs when her mother was out getting water, and she had heard a moan come from Reef's bed. Drawing nearer, she had seen his face. It was the color of skim-milk. She had run out of the house and had climbed to her place in the haymow where she could be alone to think it out by herself.

It was easier to struggle with such thoughts here where the quivering turquoise of the sky was a thing of beauty above you and where you could look out over the burnished spaces of ripe grain that spread to the horizon. There was something reassuring even in the sound of busy scratching that came from the barnyard below where the hens were industriously searching the pebbly ground beside the barn. The very farm buildings seemed striving to tell her that life was a steady, a settled thing, its grimmest misfortune only a ripple on the surface of the stream. From where she lay she could see all of

the buildings save the shed where the hogs were housed and the pen where they slept like dead shapes in the sun, the flies standing on their scaly, purplish bellies. The buildings were as yet few, only those which could not be done without. There was the chicken-coop, which would have to be built tighter against the winter; the corncrib, the granary, and the house, all of cheap material and unenduring. No silo and no wagon shed just yet. But the windmill—ah! The white silver of its fan which had but yesterday cleaved the wind and mirrored the sun on every high facet, hung now in twisted, piteous shreds of worthless metal. A sudden wind had come up like a hurricane the night before. Reef had climbed up in the darkness to release the wheel—if Seth Carew had paid what he should have paid for that half section he had bought of Steve Bowers, there would have been no need of climbing up there in the darkness to release the wheel. There would have been a new windmill on the Bowers place that spring. Elsa's father had often mentioned it. Perhaps they would be able to get one next spring, anyhow. But what could that matter now? Reef had climbed up there in the darkness. . . .

Elsa became suddenly aware of a muffled sound that came to her from the roadway. She had forgotten the gray drift of dust that had been coming slowly along the road leading southward from town. For the moment, she had been thinking hard things of the Carews who had paid her father less than the land was worth. She had been blaming them because of what had happened to Reef. Now, as if her thoughts made some sort of magic, two of the Carew women came driving up the grassy lane into the Bowers farmyard. She had seen them before—these, or others of the Carews, she could not tell—driving past on the way from town, but none of them had ever come in, except once when Seth Carew himself had driven in to speak to her father. Now, in one breath-taking moment, she realized that the people she had been secretly hating only a minute before—and envying, too, only a minute before that—the very people themselves had driven up and come to a halt immediately below the doorway in which she lay.

With the deep hurt that the day had brought her still burning in her heart, she did not know whether to hate them the more for surprising her thus with their coming, or to let all other feeling dissolve into envy as she looked down upon them. The horse was a golden brown, with a taffy-colored mane and a taffy-colored tail braided and snugly rolled under in a pug; he stood flicking his hoofs, and they were the color of the yellowing piano keys at the minister's house, in Sundower. The buggy—she remembered the name of it, because Reef had told her and had shown her a picture of one like it in the mail-order catalogue—was a victoria, rubber tired and glittering splendidly

in the sunlight. The top of the buggy was down and Elsa could see that one of the Carew boys sat within, besides the two women she had seen at first. The boy, who must have been about Reef's age, was sitting between the two women, a book open upon his knees. He did not look up even when the carriage came to a full stop. The women sat in their places for a moment, looking toward the house, then looked at each other oddly, their faces seeming to stretch and flatten. Presently the older of the two, the one who had been driving, spoke sharply to the boy and tapped him on the arm with her white silk-gloved hand. He looked up indolently, yawned and closed his book, and put it behind him. Then with a droll, curled-up smile of red, plump lips, he got to his feet and stretched, blinking and smiling in the sunlight. The women waited without speaking, with an air of great forbearance.

Elsa watched, her eyes screwed up into a tangle of lashes, long and light, while the boy got down from the victoria. Then he stood up smartly, in the manner of a young soldier, Elsa thought, and swept his round straw hat from his head. Elsa could not be sure whether he was quite serious or merely acting a part for his own amusement when he pressed his hat against his blouse, flung out his other arm, and made a low bow toward the women in the carriage. The women got up and the boy extended his hand to each as she descended. Once safe on the ground, they both looked far away with a smile of pleasure and faint secrecy. The boy took charge of the horse then and led it to the narrow square of shade beside the chicken-coop.

A feeling of strange uneasiness took possession of Elsa as she saw her mother come to the door of the house and look out. She was fingering the base of her throat nervously as if she felt not quite at ease in her brown calico dress with its flounce and the curly white leaves printed in it. It was her best dress and she always wore it in time of sickness, for the doctor's sake, and against the coming of visitors. But how could the two Carew women know that? They moved over the pebbles in their high heels—Elsa could just see those heels under the drag of their skirts—as if the wearing of good clothes was a small concern in their important lives.

The boy, waiting beside the horse, glanced up and saw her; stared—and looked sternly away. But whether that sternness was again mere make-believe, Elsa could not tell. Across the field that lay close by and along the road, came a man enveloped in sun and shading his eyes with his hand as he came. That was Uncle Fred, coming to see if there might not be something for him to do, now that Reef was unable. Elsa's father had had to go to the far side of the place, at the very edge of the hollow, and would not be back

before it was time for supper. Elsa herself would have to go down and help now. She hated to go, with that boy there. But the Carew women had gone indoors, lifting their skirts carefully on the steps so that a mite of lace showed underneath. Uncle Fred had come through the fence and was talking to the boy now, pointing to the little pasture north of the barn where the horse might be allowed to run free. Elsa waited until the boy had started off with Uncle Fred leading the horse. Then she got up and pulled her apron straight and looked down to see whether her feet were clean.

CHAPTER II

When she emerged a moment later and stood before the wide open doorway of the barn, she paused and glanced to where Uncle Fred was leading the horse toward the pasture, the Carew boy following jauntily behind. Uncle Fred was a strange man. He always made you feel sorry for him, though you never could tell why. There was something in the stoop of his shoulders and the heavy plodding of his feet that made him look shamed. She had seen it in the sidelong glances he had given the victoria when he was taking the horse out of the shafts. Elsa had often seen it. It was a part of Uncle Fred, like the old felt hat he had worn as long as Elsa could remember. He was like her mother about beautiful, costly things, and rich people. The trouble with them both was that they could not play that they were those people and owned those things themselves. Elsa could look at the victoria standing there in the shade and think of it as some sleek live thing that could not bear the sun too long. Then she could laugh about it, remembering that it was only a buggy after all. But Uncle Fred and her mother were different. They didn't laugh, much.

If it had been Pa, now, Elsa thought, he would have looked at the thing there in the shade, raised his eyebrows and made a funny face so that she would have doubled up with laughing at him. She remembered the time when her teacher, Miss Glide, had come to call on them, wearing a high, yellow pompadour with a "rat" under it. Elsa was sitting beside her mother and Miss Glide was sitting with her back to the kitchen door, facing them. Pa glanced in from the kitchen, and must have seen Miss Glide's pompadour, for the next thing Elsa knew, there he was standing in the doorway with a loaf of bread on his head. Elsa couldn't breathe and got so tight all over that she had to rush out of the room. That was Pa's way. He would laugh and snort that he was a plain man with plain ways and had no use for fancy claptrap. But Elsa knew that he had sent for a leather-bound copy of Emerson once, and when it had arrived there had not been one penny in the house to pay for it and it had had to go back again; and Pa had gone away that night and somebody had driven his horses home early the next morning, with him lying in the back of the wagon.

Uncle Fred and the Carew boy were coming back from the pasture. Elsa started up the pathway to the house, a little annoyed at herself for dreaming

there when she might have easily reached the house before they had turned back. She did not want to meet the Carew boy—with her soiled apron, and her bare legs. Her walk broke into a run which she checked suddenly at a call from Uncle Fred.

“Elsa!”

She stood still and waited. After all, who was this Carew boy that she should be frightened—with his clean blouse and his straw hat and his red, plump lips?

“Go in and ask your ma does she want anything done,” Uncle Fred said as he came up, jerking his head toward the house.

At that moment Elsa’s mother herself came out, pushing open the screen door, at the top of which an oilcloth fringe swung out, scattering the flies. She came down into the yard and Elsa saw a patch of red on each of her cheeks and one at the base of her throat, just where those two knobs of bone stuck out. Elsa moved close to her mother’s skirt and buried her face in the brown folds of it until she felt faintly dizzy from the sweet, dry smell of the calico. She wished these people had not come, to distress her mother with their fine clothes and their fine horse and carriage.

“I want a chicken for supper, Fred,” her mother was saying. “I’ve asked them to wait and have supper with us. They want to see Steve, anyhow. You better take one of them young roosters we got from Johnson. And singe it good, too, Fred. Elsa, you go and bring in some kindling. Maybe our young visitor, here, will go with you.”

Elsa felt sudden shyness. It itched at her toes so that those of one foot dug into those of the other; it made her scalp tingle and it screwed up her eyes and made her mouth smile all on one side. The boy approached slowly and took off his round hat. His head was all shiny curls, short and dark brown, and where his hair rose in a little ridge above his forehead the sun struck it and made it flash back copper. Elsa stared at him, forgetting herself now. He had black eyebrows shaped like little minnows, she thought, darting straight inward from the temples, and under them strange eyes. They were like Reef’s moss agate, dark green with black threads of moss in them. His cheeks and lips were red and plushy—like a raspberry. The Carew boy was a raspberry. Elsa giggled a little.

Her mother was moving away, and the protective volume of her skirt with her. “See where Lenny is—and get me in the wood,” she said and went up the pathway to the house.

The Carew boy stood with his hands in his pockets, feet spread apart in manly fashion. He pursed his lips and whistled softly to himself, provokingly, then broke out suddenly.

“Who’s Lenny?”

“He’s my brother, Leon,” Elsa replied fiercely.

“Oh,” the boy commented, picking up a stone and shying it at a weed, “I thought perhaps he was just another girl.”

Elsa felt suddenly hot and tight. Her lashes winked quickly. “Huh!” she said with scorn. “I wore overalls for two whole summers down in Iowa. I could be wearing them yet only I like dresses better than overalls.”

The boy smiled indulgently, dryly, in the manner of one who had long since outgrown such discussions. He discreetly waived the point. “What’s your name?” he asked.

“Elsa Margaret Hermina Bowers,” she informed him with pride, chin lifting on the first syllable of each name, eyes half closed.

“Gee! How can you remember all that? How old are you?”

Elsa hesitated. “I’m eleven,” she said finally, breathing hard, and, augmenting the lie, “—past.”

The boy frowned, the dark minnows of his brows darting together. “You’re small for your age,” he observed, insufferably grown up. “How old is your brother?”

“I got two brothers.”

“Leon,” the Carew boy prompted at once.

“Oh . . . he’s only a kid. He’s eight.”

Their talk was halted suddenly by a call from the house. “Elsa—! Get in the wood now!”

She started off at once, the boy following her.

“We’ll get Lenny, too,” she suggested. “I guess he’s playing over in the pigweed house.”

They came to the pigweed house, a clearing crushed down in the midst of tall, dense pigweeds towering over their heads, lush and soft-leafed, with thick green stems, waxen and cool. The clearing was a pool of shadow, dark green and damp with its floor of crushed large leaves. It smelt of the earth,

and stillness, and rains that had come and gone, and long, remote mornings with white, swollen clouds journeying across the blue, high above the waving green fronds of leaves. It smelt of June, and July and August, and all the drowse and timelessness of summer. Elsa's heart beat quickly as she led her young visitor into her sanctuary.

Leon was there, a nest of a little boy, curled up and sound asleep. His yellow ringlets were deep in the mash of leaves, his chubby grimed palm cupped upward.

Elsa was all tenderness for him. He was so helpless, so little. She hated to wake him. She got down on her knees and lifted his head in her arms.

“Wake up, Lenny! Got to help Elsa get in wood. Company's come!”

Leon fought her off, rubbing his nose and eyes with both fists. His sister laughed and let him go, secretly proud of his manliness. Leon would endure no show of affection. He got sturdily to his feet and stared with large pupils at the stranger who had come with Elsa.

“What's your name?” he asked, suddenly awake.

The Carew boy laughed outright, then turned to Elsa.

“I've got only one name,” he said, as if he were merely carrying on the conversation from where they had broken off a few moments before. “We never have two names in our family. But they go back a long way, and they mean a lot, so we don't need more than one. That's what my father says. My mother—she's dead now—she didn't like my name. It's Bayliss—Bayliss Carew. My great-grandfather's name was Bayliss—and he came from England on a sailing ship that took eight weeks to cross the ocean. There were pirates then and my great-grandfather's ship was chased, but it got away—just in time.”

There followed a long silence during which Elsa absorbed the information and wondered why there was nothing in the Bowers history to match a race with pirates. Leon was determined that there should be.

“My mother came from Germany,” he declared. “She crossed the ocean when she was a little girl and the ship was wrecked—and she had to swim to shore. And she was almost drowned—but a dog—a big dog came out and saved her.” He was talking very fast and Elsa could only watch him, fascinated. She felt she should stop him before he went too far, but she shut her lips so tightly that two dimples appeared below the corners of her lower lip.

Bayliss looked from Leon to Elsa, frankly skeptical. “She did not!” he blustered. “How far did she swim?”

Leon threw out his arms and shut his eyes into sharp wrinkles. “Oh . . . miles and miles . . . a hundred miles, I guess.”

Bayliss was smiling broadly now. “When did the dog come and save her?”

Leon’s imagination halted before the question, or perhaps it was quite lost in the picture he had drawn for Bayliss in the hope of matching the story of the pirate ship. At any rate, he could think of nothing to say. It was Bayliss himself who broke the heavy silence that had come down about them. He thrust his hand suddenly into his pocket and said, “If you guess what I’ve got here, you can have it.”

Leon had begun a yawn but he cut it short in surprise. “A knife!” he exclaimed promptly.

“Nope. Guess again. Three guesses.”

The little boy stared at the pocket, trying to penetrate it with his sharp eyes. Only two more guesses. Elsa herself eyed the pocket.

“A Jew’s harp!” Leon’s shot went wild and Elsa looked her disgust.

Leon swallowed. “Well, a glass alley!”

Bayliss laughed and shook his head. “You can have it anyhow,” he said gently, and drew from his pocket a green enameled frog with red distended eyes which opened its mouth and croaked convincingly and at will.

Both Leon and Elsa regarded it enchanted as it lay in Bayliss’ palm. “Here—take it,” Bayliss said, thrusting it toward Leon. “I’ve got another one at home.”

A curious glance came into Elsa’s eyes. The long lashes intertwined, winking. Suddenly she pushed Bayliss’ hand away. “No,” she said sharply. “He can’t have it. He didn’t guess.”

Leon reached for the toy and Elsa slapped his hand. He made a slow, twisted grimace, stamped his foot and stiffened his body. Bayliss lifted one eyebrow.

“Aw—why can’t he have it? I have another and I can get lots more if I want them.”

“Well—so can we!” Elsa retorted. “Come on, Leon. We got to get the wood in.”

Bayliss scowled, his eyes darkening, his cheeks darkening. He stood there with the toy thrust foolishly out on his palm, his generous impulse thwarted by a girl in a homely dress whose bare legs were much too thin and none too clean. With quick anger he said, “You can not! You’ve got to buy these and you haven’t got the money. I’ve got lots of it in my pockets—and lots more at home!”

Elsa was outdone, for the moment. She groped frantically for something that would startle this young braggart and put him in his place.

“My brother Reef got his hand cut off last night on the windmill!” she finally blurted out.

The effect was sensational. Elsa felt a little dizzy, a little hollow. Bayliss had gone white, sick-looking.

“Which one?” His voice was an awed whisper.

“The right one, of course,” she said. She felt sick now, too, and wanted to cry.

Leon had forgotten the frog.

The three moved out of the green well of shadow; out between the smooth jade stalks of the pigweeds rooted in darkness; out into the brilliant, slow and mighty tide of the prairie sun. Bayliss Carew looked up at the windmill, its vanes hanging in white tatters in the sunlight.

CHAPTER III

The sitting-room felt very full, like a church when the congregation stood up to sing, Elsa thought. And yet, besides her mother, and herself sitting in her little red rocking-chair, there were only Bayliss and the two Carew women in the room. Perhaps it was because Mrs. Grace Carew was so wide and Miss Hildreth Carew, her sister-in-law, so very high. They filled the tiny sitting-room like two large birds in a small cage, spreading and settling down over the cheap green carpet with the faded roses in it; over the imitation oak chairs with the crocheted doilies hanging on the backs; over all the gray, hot air of the room. The green window shades had been drawn but there were two large holes in one of them and two ragged splotches of sunlight played over Mrs. Grace Carew's person, one on the gold locket which dangled upon her breast, the other on the white taffeta pleats of her skirt. She seemed pleasantly aware of the eyes of light and rocked to and fro, watching the piercing beams move up and down.

Bayliss had come in with Elsa, Leon having gone to the field with Uncle Fred. The Carew boy sat looking up at the ceiling, paying no attention to his aunts. When they wanted his attention, they had to speak to him twice before he would reply. When he did speak, he was very polite and they seemed very pleased and fond. Elsa thought they already looked upon him as a grown man, and that puzzled her.

From the time Elsa had come into the room, the two Carew women had talked incessantly. The manner of their talk was strange. It was as if there was no one else in the room but these two. And they talked at each other, as if they had been quarreling on the way out from town and were merely proceeding with the quarrel, quite regardless of everything about them. Did they not know about Reef? Elsa looked at her mother, saw her sitting with hands meekly folded, eyes sad under her smile. Had she not told them? Or was it simply that other people's affairs were no concern of the Carews? Suddenly Elsa could not bear her mother's humility. She wanted to burst into the endless chatter of these strangers and tell them about Reef. She wanted to get up and tell them to go on home where they could sit in their fine house, the house with the new wing building, and quarrel as much as they liked so long as there was quiet in the house where Reef lay upstairs dreaming of his pain.

That, of course, would not be right. You had to be polite to people like the Carews. And besides, they had come because of some business they had with Elsa's father, who would be coming in soon now wanting his supper and asking about Reef. Pa would talk to them, maybe joke with them in spite of Reef—he always had something funny to say where women were. He would have them stay for supper, too; make them stay even if they wanted to leave. Then there would be more talk at the table, and more joking, and then they would go away with their fine horse and their sleek buggy and the house in the hollow would be quiet again.

“They will never come here again,” Elsa thought. “They will never come here because they are not our kind of folks.”

Old Sarah Phillips would come, and Fanny Ipsmiller, and Nate Brazell, but they wore clothes like other people's and talked about things you could understand. The Carew women talked about themselves and their men, talked in a queer way, as if the Carews were kings and queens and not just folks, as if you could never be quite like them no matter how you tried. . . . And the sun spots move up and down on Grace Carew's white taffeta, and across the room in the dim light Miss Hildreth sits under the wedding picture of Ma and Pa with their heads together in a gold, chipped frame. Ma isn't listening much to their talk; she is listening with one ear upstairs where Reef is lying, the other out in the kitchen where the roasting chicken spits and hisses. There would be enough chicken for the visitors and perhaps a little for Pa and Uncle Fred when the others were served.

“You speak, Grace,” Miss Hildreth Carew was saying crisply, “as though you had been born into the family, and not merely married into it. I beg your pardon, of course, but that silver was brought over from England by the second Bayliss Carew on his first trip, not by the first Bayliss on his second trip, as you would have it. He didn't dare go back, that first Bayliss. Of course, Grace, you never did have the family history straight. Not that I have any fault to find with you there. It's hard enough for us who were born into the family to get it straight.”

Miss Hildreth seemed to be very old to be unmarried, Elsa thought. Did no one ever ask her to marry him, or did she never want to get married like other people? She was nice to look at. She was like drying autumn flowers; like stiff-petaled black-eyed Susans, varnished and prickly and not exactly sweet. Looking at her now, Elsa remembered Miss Gertie Schwartz, the thin, tall woman who used to play the organ in the church down in Iowa, and always wore black, stiff dresses that were narrow across the chest, and a black velvet ribbon around her throat. Elsa's father used to tell about her.

One stormy night two men driving a lumber wagon stopped their horses just as she was going to run straight into them, her arms outspread, her black hair down and streaming all about her, the lightning on her white face. She was calling some one's name, but they never would let the children hear whose name it was. Gertie Schwartz had gone out of her mind and was running in the rain, calling, calling.

Miss Hildreth Carew was like Gertie Schwartz. But Elsa liked her. She did not think she would like Mrs. Grace Carew. She was softer, gentler, better-mannered, perhaps. But how can you know why you like some people and dislike others? You should try to like every one. You ought to love your neighbors. Well, Elsa liked Miss Hildreth. She liked her tar-black hair and her dark, narrow eyes and her nose that came out in her face like a square bone.

"I have always thought, Hildreth," Grace said quietly, "that it was quite enough to marry into the Carew family without having been born into it." Her chin, as she spoke, drew back against the folds of her neck like a turkey gobbler's. "When I married Peter Carew I did so because I thought him the best man who ever walked. I may say I still think so. But there isn't much in the family history to recommend it to any woman. I never have been superstitious, Hildreth, as you know, but I've learned enough of the family history to convince me that there is some sort of Nemesis pursuing it. What about the first Bayliss Carew, innocently hounded out of England? What about the second Bayliss Carew, innocently hounded out of Connecticut? And then his sons, Seth and Peter, the victims of a swindler in Springfield, innocently hounded——"

Hildreth sniffed loudly. "Innocently—rats!" The faint vein-channels in her cheeks were suddenly flooded with red. "There never was such a thing as an innocent Carew—I am speaking of the men, of course. The Carew men have always taken what they wanted, where they wanted it. You mention the first Bayliss Carew—innocently hounded out of England. Who was he? A gentleman, yes—God bless him!—but one who drank and fought and gambled until he had wasted his father's estate and couldn't find money enough to pay his debts! And what about his son, the second Bayliss Carew—innocently hounded out of Connecticut?" She shook a bony finger at Grace, who had lowered her eyes and was patting the white pleated taffeta over her knee. "Not for nothing was he hounded out of the place he had lived in for years. He was my own father, Grace, but I have never been afraid to face the truth. His little scandals were taken lightly enough by his friends, but when he began his romance with——"

“The children, Hildreth, the children!” Grace murmured.

“Well—” Hildreth cleared her throat indignantly, looking about in a flurry. “Don’t talk to me about the innocence of the Carew men. If they are punished, it is not for nothing. Not that they have ever learned anything from their misfortunes. What they get they occasionally pay for, it’s true—but they get it, my dear, they get it! And in the long run, it is their women who suffer for them. My God! how my mother could suffer! The Carew women—! Who was it got Seth and Peter out of their scrape in Springfield? What would have become of the family if we women hadn’t taken hold and got out in time to save it?”

Elsa, watching her alertly, thought that she was almost beautiful as she talked. Her eyes were bright with malice, with perverse delight in setting forth the devilries of the Carews to those who had never heard them before. She hoped that Miss Hildreth might go on talking, because of the little fires that burned in her eyes. But Grace, it seemed, thought the talk had gone far enough.

“Really, Hildreth, is it quite good taste——”

“Good taste—fiddlehooks! The Bowerses might as well know the truth about us—first as last. What’s more, they’d better know it from us. The Carews have been everything from horse thieves to international spies working both ways. They’re as crooked as the devil and as beautiful as gods. And the crookedest thing about them is that they always manage to marry good women.”

She was like a preacher in a pulpit. No, she was like that lawyer who came last year and talked to Pa about something.

Then—Reef! Reef upstairs, with pain in his dreams—because he had climbed up in the darkness to release the wheel in the wind—because Seth Carew had refused to pay what the land was worth when he bought it from Steve Bowers. She had forgotten Reef for the moment—forgotten him, and her sitting there listening to Seth Carew’s sister—and liking her—and wishing she would talk some more because of the little fires in her eyes! But that was only for the moment. Now—she hated herself for listening at all. She hated Miss Hildreth and that other one, hated their bright crackle and smell of silk, and their talk of other Carews who belonged far, far back in the dark green past—like mirrors reflecting mirrors. She hated their nephew, Bayliss, raspberry red, bored, staring at the cracked paper on the ceiling of the Bowers sitting-room. She hated her mother, docile, waiting, heart-heavy,

listening. She flashed up out of her chair, her mouth shut tight and downward, and ran out of the house.

Where she lay among the crushed leaves in the pigweed house, Elsa heard her father's clear whistle from the other side of the creek, almost a half mile away. He always came home at evening whistling in that high, piercing way of his, as though he wanted those at home to know that he was coming to supper. Ma always heeded the warning so as to have things ready for him to sit down as soon as he had washed his hands and face. "That's Pa now," she would say. "Get the dishes on the table—he'll be here in a minute." She would be expecting Elsa now to set the table while she finished her work about the stove. Pa never wasted any time getting to the table once he was in from the fields. It would be different this evening, of course. He would have to go up and look at Reef first, as soon as he came in. After that he would talk to the Carew women for a while and carry himself altogether as if getting to supper was no great thing, after all.

Elsa could not go back to the house, even though she knew her mother must be waiting for her to help with the table. She would not face those Carew women again without her father. She stood up quietly and listened to the whistling, a clear, unbroken melody that came up from the grassland beside the hollow and across the field of ripe wheat like the rippling song of a meadow-lark. You would almost think the world was the same today as it was yesterday, as it had been days without number when Reef would come home from the fields with Pa, driving the team with his two strong hands and the weight of his shoulders thrown back against the tug of the lines. You would almost think he had forgotten that Reef wasn't with him now, to hear him whistling like that. But that was the way with Pa. He could whistle and he could laugh, and all the time you could tell nothing about what was going on in his head. Ma would say, "What's the use in living!" But Pa would say, "What's the use in dying!" and go off whistling to his work in the fields.

Elsa slipped from the cover of the pigweed house and ran down past the barn to where the trail followed the edge of the wheatfield. Where the creek with its fringe of willows crossed the trail and made another field, she waited in a tangle of grass and rank weeds that were already a little gray from the late summer and flushed faintly from the low sun. Her father's whistling had stopped. Perhaps he was thinking of Reef now. All at once she felt like crying. There was something that made you want to cry, waiting alone there in the tangle of grass and weeds and thinking about Reef, who

ought to be driving the horses home instead of dreaming up there under the low roof, and strangers in the house.

She heard the heavy thud of the horses' feet in the soft ground and the sharp tangle of the swinging chains. In a moment now they would be crossing the creek and coming up out of the willows. "Come on, Blackie!" Her father's voice sounded very close there with the willows about him, and very soft, too, as though he hadn't been thinking of the horses, at all. Then, suddenly, they were out of the willows, her father was beside her and was sweeping her up in his arms and setting her astride old Blackie. For a moment then she wanted to cling to him with her arms about his brown neck and make herself think that there was nothing wrong in the whole world. But her father went back to his place behind the team and Elsa, looking across the yellowing wheat, could see the house where the Carew women were still talking and the Carew boy still staring up at the cracked paper on the ceiling of the sitting-room. And above the thud of the heavy feet and the sharp clanking of the trace-chains, her father's voice was asking about Reef: Had he slept well since the doctor left, and what had made her come out alone from the house when she might have been giving a little help to her mother? When she told him that the two Carew women were waiting for him and were going to stay for supper, he said nothing and presently began whistling to himself as if people like the Carews had been calling to see him every day of his life.

Uncle Fred was in the barnyard. "Those two Carew hawks are waiting for you in the house," he said.

"Elsa was telling me. Maybe they've brought the payment, though it won't be due for near a month yet."

"I guess a month don't matter much to a man with Seth Carew's money."

"Maybe Hildreth is down to get a good look at you, Fred. There's no telling where a woman's fancy is going to strike."

Uncle Fred sniffed and plodded away with the team. Elsa's father laughed loudly and started for the house.

"We'll be getting you a new dress and some shoes and stockings to cover those bare legs of yours one of these days," he told Elsa. You could tell from the way he said it that he was thinking of the Carew women and their finery. "And your mother would be none the worse for a decent something to change into when people come calling."

To be always hoping for things that never happened, and to be meeting people for whom such things happened without their trying! Above all, to have dreadful things happen to you when others escaped who were better able to bear it! Was there nothing more to being alive than that?

Elsa's mother was in the kitchen. "You go in and talk to the Carews, Steve, while I finish getting supper," she said quickly. "And you, Elsa, get the dishes on. You have no call running off when you know I need you to help."

Through the open doorway, Elsa, laying the dishes, could hear the subdued voices of the visitors. They must know about Reef now, or why should Miss Hildreth's words come in a whisper? Presently her father's feet sounded on the stairs. He was going up to look at Reef before he went in to talk to the Carews. His step was slow, muffled, and Elsa set the plates on the table very softly so that she could follow the sound of his feet crossing the floor above, to halt at last by the side of Reef's bed. For a moment then she stood—heard Lenny calling to Uncle Fred at the barn; heard Miss Hildreth's sharp whisper from the sitting-room; heard her mother move something on the stove in the kitchen; but above all, heard her own heart beating clamorously as she waited for the sound of Reef's voice talking to her father. What if her father should speak once—and then again—and get no answer? People sometimes died in their sleep. Old Sarah Phillips said so. Her father's soft step moved across the floor overhead. He was coming away again.

"The boy's having a good sleep," he said as soon as he reached the bottom of the stairs. Then he went into the sitting-room.

"Will you hurry, Elsa!" Her mother had come in from the kitchen, looking about her nervously, the red patches on her cheeks flaming now from her work at the stove.

It was hard to hurry when you had to listen to the talk coming from the sitting-room, low, serious talk that would be about Reef and how he had climbed up in the darkness to release the wheel that had not been working right for weeks and how the wind had come in a sudden gust. . . . People *did* die in their sleep, sometimes. But why couldn't you feel yourself dying and wake up before it was too late? "Yes, it's a great loss to us. And he was getting to be such a help about the place, too. But we'll have to give him his schooling now and try to make up for it." As if Pa hadn't always said Reef would get his schooling, anyhow!

And then they were coming in to the table. Elsa's father went to a small cupboard in the corner where he kept his papers.

“I’ll give you the receipt now, Miss Hildreth, before I forget it,” he was saying.

“Just sit in, now,” her mother urged, making awkward motions with her red hands and shifting chairs about busily.

“And you can tell your brother for me, Miss Hildreth, that there isn’t a better quarter-section of land within a hundred miles of Sundower,” Elsa’s father said proudly, coming to his place at the table and handing the slip of white paper to Hildreth Carew.

“The Carews, Mr. Bowers,” she said, “know good land as well as anybody else. When they buy land, they buy nothing but the best. It’s the same with their land as it is with their women. My grandfather used to say that a man had no right to an opinion on anything unless he was a good judge of women and horseflesh. If they knew how to use what they get it would be a sight better for all concerned. It’s the misfortune of good land, good women and good horseflesh that a Carew’s judgment stops as soon as he gets what he wants.”

Elsa’s father laughed as he began to pass to the visitors the dishes before him. “Give them time, Miss Hildreth. They’ll learn.”

“Pht! Time! They’ve had generations of it. The Carew men have had their own way so long they’ll never get over it. I ought to know, Mr. Bowers. I’ve lived the biggest part of one generation with them. Somewhere back in the history of the family there was a pirate or two and the Carew blood has carried the taint of it ever since. That’s the only way I can account for it, and it’s as good a way as any, to my way of thinking.”

Elsa’s father was chuckling to himself. “I hope your sister-in-law has a better opinion of the family than you have,” he said.

“The Carews are a fine family, Mr. Bowers,” Mrs. Grace Carew said, very mildly. “Hildreth sometimes——”

“Pht! I tell the truth, Grace! What’s more, you know it. There might have been some hope for the Carew men when they took up farming, but they think more of a horse-race than they do of a harvest. They buy more land than they can farm decently—and then they put machinery on it to do the work they ought to be doing with their own hands. They’re quite hopeless, however you choose to look at them. Their women know it.”

The little fires were flashing again in Miss Hildreth’s eyes and Elsa was watching, fascinated. Beside Elsa, Bayliss sat, quite bored. You would

almost think he was too grown-up to heed any longer what a Carew woman might have to say about the men of the family.

Once, out of sheer deviltry, Bayliss moved his foot stealthily across and set the edge of his shoe on one of Elsa's bare toes. As he pinched the toe against the floor, he did not even look at her. She squealed sharply, but Bayliss continued to look straight before him. A moment later, however, he turned to her and grinned.

"I hope you're not casting eyes at our Elsa, young fellow," Elsa's father said, shaking a finger at Bayliss.

"Steve!" her mother protested.

"God forbid!" Miss Hildreth breathed.

"I married a Carew, myself," Mrs. Grace said sweetly. "A girl might do worse."

"She couldn't!" said Miss Hildreth flatly.

CHAPTER IV

In November of the year in which Elsa Bowers was fourteen, the man whom Dale Whitney had hired at harvest time was found dead beside a fencepost that had been attacked by dry rot. A green post which he had cut near the creek and carried to the spot to replace the old one was lying on the ground beside him.

“Just as if a man is meant to go so far and no farther with the work of this world,” old Sarah Phillips observed when she visited the Bowerses on the following Sunday afternoon. “Aye—like a thief in the night—that’s what it says. And so it is, so it is!”

From the table in the sitting-room came Uncle Fred’s sudden, “Je-hoshaphat!” followed by Steve Bowers’ roar of laughter. The Lord, Elsa’s father contended, did not hold it greatly against a man that he played cards on a Sunday when he was too tired to play on any other day of the week. He and Uncle Fred had spent most of the afternoon over a game of pinochle. Elsa paused in her work of setting the table and glanced through the sitting-room doorway. Her father was leaning back in his chair, chuckling heartily at Uncle Fred, who wagged his head slowly and clucked lugubriously as he reshuffled the cards. And from the kitchen came the thin voice of Sarah Phillips and her age-old cackle of the dying and of the gloomy mischance that lurks in the pathway of the living.

How readily life took on an air of festivity, Elsa thought, in spite of poor old Sarah’s muttering; in spite of the man who had lain all day beside a rotten fencepost, dead with his task half done; in spite of the countless hurts that time somehow eases until you can finally forget. There was, for example, the horrible memory of that day in August, four years ago now, when Elsa had gone about all day in the fear that Reef would never waken from the sleep into which he had fallen after the visit of Doctor Olson. The sharp agony of that day had dulled with the passing seasons and might have been at last forgotten had it not been for a look that had come into Reef’s eyes one day in the spring of the year now closing, when he had come in from school to tell them that Bayliss Carew had been chosen valedictorian of the class that was to be graduated a month later from the high school at Hurley. The honor was Reef’s, by every right, but he was not a Carew. The look that Elsa had seen in Reef’s eyes was neither of disappointment nor of

envy. It was the old look she had surprised there more than four years ago when Reef had taken the lines from his father and had started to drive the team to the field—only to surrender them a moment later because he could not hold the team in check with one hand, and that the left hand. “If I only had my two hands, now,” he had said—and that was all. And then there had come that look into his eyes! The same look it was that Elsa saw there when he came in to tell them of the honor that had fallen upon Bayliss Carew. They had been silent for a moment after he had told them the news and Elsa, watching him narrowly, was almost sure he had whispered, “If I only had my two hands, now. . . .” With Reef away at law school in Minneapolis, now, however, even that hurt was less.

With no more provocation than that it was a Sunday evening in November, with cold veal and pumpkin pie for supper, and with her father and Uncle Fred playing pinochle in the sitting-room, the house glowed and swelled with eager life. It was as if it said: I am here on the prairie, four walls and a roof, sheltering and warming human creatures against the coming of night and a raw wind blowing out of a lonely, yellowing west! It was the white tablecloth instead of the one with the red checks. That signified Sunday and the presence of a visitor, even though the visitor was no one but poor old Sarah Phillips. It was festive, too, when you placed beside the cut-glass berrybowl—Elsa had once told Lily Fletcher that it was cut-glass, and now almost believed it herself—the silver spoon with the arched handle, which had been presented in a three-piece set to her mother at a farewell surprise party given in her honor before they left Iowa.

Elsa’s mother came to the doorway and gave the table a look of appraisal. “Water on the table, Elsa!” Her voice was quick, cheerful, in momentary contentment that she was caring for her own. “Come on now, Steve—Fred! Sit in. Mrs. Phillips! Come, Leon! Bring the potatoes off the back of the stove, Elsa!”

As she spoke, she moved the silver reflector behind the wall lamp so that it would shine directly on the table. Elsa had long since got over her amusement at seeing her face reflected in the concave mirror at the back of the lamp, but Leon still made faces into it on occasion.

“Might as well bring that lamp in with you, Pa. I don’t see why we shouldn’t have a decent light on a Sunday.” A touch of sad complaining shadowed Mrs. Bowers’ voice at times, as if she expected but grudging compliance on the part of those she addressed.

They were all seated at last and Leon said grace, hostilely; a stiff, swift mumble. Then Elsa's father began to chuckle afresh, going over the points of the game to show Uncle Fred where he had lost. Uncle Fred was plainly nettled by his defeat. He wagged his head, looking very old and tired of his body, Elsa thought. One of these days they would be finding *him* lying in a field, maybe, or beside a fencepost, his work suddenly at an end.

"It's goin' round that Florence Carew is goin' to marry Mahlon Breen, come January next," old Sarah Phillips observed to Elsa's mother.

Steve Bowers ceased baiting Uncle Fred to listen to the old woman's gossip.

"Florence Carew going to marry the banker?" he exclaimed in surprise. "Why, Florence is only a girl!"

"Old enough, I guess," Elsa's mother spoke up. "Near two years older than Bayliss and he's—" She turned to Elsa.

"Nineteen," Elsa told her.

"I *know*," her father went on, "but Mahlon Breen is in his forties, I'll bet."

Elsa's mother smiled; a wry, hard smile. "Steve Bowers, you never will get over thinking that every one else in the world acts the same as you. The Carews have a way of getting on in the world and if Seth Carew marries his girl to the banker in Sundower, it's just——"

"Pshaw, Ma!" Elsa's father interrupted. "You talk like you had it in for them Carews all the time. What harm have they ever done us? And I'm sure I wish Mahlon Breen luck, the old gadabout, if it's true."

"Oh, it's true, right enough!" old Sarah piped up.

But Steve Bowers went on. "If I hadn't got that loan from Breen last summer, Reef would be plugging along on the farm today instead of going to law school in Minneapolis."

"While young Bayliss plays around home," Elsa's mother commented. Elsa saw that her mother was already over the excitement of making supper, and was lapsing, as usual, into discontent.

"As if that was any business of ours," her father retorted, a little impatiently.

Uncle Fred stared down at his plate, then wrinkled his high, narrow forehead. "I guess there was doin's over to the big house early this mornin',"

he said, “though that mayn’t be our business, either.”

Elsa’s father looked furtively at her mother. He had a vast indifference to sustain, an altogether lofty indifference to anything the Carews might take into their heads to do. And yet—“Doings? What doings, Fred?”

“I met their hired man, Dave Miller, on the road this mornin’,” Uncle Fred went on. “Seems Miss Hildreth drove the gray team over Hurley way before daybreak this mornin’. She come back at sun-up with *him* in the seat beside her, not able——”

“*Him?* Who, Fred?” Elsa’s mother interrupted.

Uncle Fred turned upon her querulously. “Who? Ain’t I said who? Who would it be? Seth’s gone to Minneapolis, what for nobody knows. An’ it couldn’t be Seth’s boy, Michael, an’ him away to college. An’ it wasn’t young Bayliss. Who would it be but Peter Carew?”

Elsa’s mother sighed. “Oh, well! What happened?”

“A plenty, I guess,” Uncle Fred resumed. “Miss Hildreth must ’a’ picked him up some’eres along the road to Hurley an’ brought him home. Dave Miller says Peter’s wife, Grace herself, come out an’ dragged him into the house. An’ Dave says Peter wasn’t in Hurley last night a-tall, ’cause Dave was over there himself an’ he never seen hide nor hair of a Carew in town all evenin’. You can make your own guess, if you want.”

He chewed significantly, pulling his thin face to one side.

“Down south of Hurley, I’ll bet,” Elsa’s father exclaimed, forgetting himself for the moment. “Down with that pack of Bohemian dogs, I’ll bet a dollar, and their——”

“Watch your tongue, Pa!” Elsa’s mother said calmly.

Uncle Fred cackled knowingly. “Bet your life he was. An’ what’s more, Grace and Hildreth both know it an’ are tryin’ to cover it up. They was at church this mornin’—the two old ones and the two young ones—up to Sundower. Dave says when they come back from church Peter was out lookin’ over his horses, fresh as a new-laid egg, just as if nothin’ was wrong. An’ Grace and Hildreth goes up an’ kisses him like it was a weddin’ or somethin’. That’s the way Dave puts it.”

Sarah Phillips turned the talk to news of Nate Brazell and Fanny Ipsmiller who kept Nels Lundquist’s house. Elsa listened to them, the murmur of their voices sounding far away as she thought of Peter Carew and the dark hints that Uncle Fred had made concerning where he had spent last

night. To Elsa, Peter Carew had gradually become something at once sinister and splendid, with this oblique talk of him in the house and at the table. He rode a horse as no one else in the country could. Peter Carew was bronzed and massive—and he was forever laughing, it seemed. He often rode past the Bowers place on his way to Sundower or Hurley. He always stopped for a chat with any one who happened to be about. Once when Elsa was wading in the ditch along the road, Peter Carew had come by on his beautiful, nervous chestnut horse, and had called out, “Look out there, little girl, or you’ll get your feet wet!” Elsa had looked straight at him and had called back, “I *want* to get my feet wet.” Then he had laughed and laughed, and had ridden away waving his riding whip at her, laughing marvelously. Elsa had been mortified at her own stupidity, after she had had time to think it over, but later, when she thought of Peter Carew, it seemed to her that he had gone down the road only a little way, and then had floated up into the air and afar among the great blue-white balloon clouds that had been in the sky that day.

On a Saturday that was brown with late November, and when crows were flocking in black, sorrowful companies over the stripped fields, and dead leaves were lying flat and still and clear under the glass of rain pools in the ditches along the road, Elsa drove alone in the old Bowers democrat through Elder’s Hollow. Early that fall, her mother had sent to the city for a knitting machine in the hope that she might be able to supply her neighbors with woolen socks and stockings and knitted scarfs and so have a little something in her pocket when she went to Sundower or to Hurley. It was more than a month now since she had gone the rounds of the district and talked with the women. On the seat beside Elsa lay the box of knitted goods tagged with slips of white paper on which her mother had written the names of the women to whom the articles were to be delivered.

The idea of spending a day among the neighbors had been a very pleasant one to Elsa until her mother had suggested that it might be profitable to call on the Carews and show them a sample of the work. “They can’t do more than say no,” her mother had observed defensively. But Elsa felt that they might, somehow, and dreaded the visit.

She set out early in the afternoon, dressed snugly in a red “stocking-cap” and Reef’s sheepskin lined jacket, for there was no shelter on the democrat. The fields were swept by a high wind, fresh and wet from the rain of the night before, and running like a cool tide in the sea of the air. Wherever the wind was bound, Elsa thought, there the whole world seemed to be going.

Here in an empty field a band of dry reeds stood, bowed and following the wind, each flying at its top, like a pennant, a single little withered leaf. When the horses lagged for a moment on the crest of a knoll, Elsa raised her head and listened. To her ears, schooled to sounds of earth and air, came the dim rumor of flight. It was the flight of the wild duck—the wild duck, too, flying with the wind.

Below the knoll she crossed a bridge over the sluggish creek beside which cat-tails stood, then took the rough road that led up to the house in which “Doc” Petersen lived. It was said that “Doc” could raise nothing on that farm of his but children. As Elsa drove into the yard on this November day, the children ran to meet her as if they had sprung up out of the stony earth about the door like some belated, dismal, weedy harvest. In their long, skimpy dresses or meager, frayed overalls, they followed her, staring silently, as she drove up—five of them. And there was no telling how many more there were indoors. “My kids never seem to grow up where they can be of any use,” Doc was often heard to complain. And people didn’t like to remind him that two of them *had* grown up, because those two had left him and had come to no good. Mrs. Petersen came to the door and received her parcel of stockings, embarrassed and eager. She’d send one of the boys down with the money, she said, looking at Elsa through the door which she held open only a few inches. A child with a red patch under its nose looked out from behind her apron. “Looks like winter’s comin’, eh?” Mrs. Petersen said. It was so nice of Mrs. Bowers to let her have the stockings cheaper. She had so many to buy for, goodness knows, it was like pouring water into a sieve. The child sniffed and stretched its raw, moist nostrils and upper lip downward. The door closed.

At the Magnussons’ and Fletchers’ Elsa stayed a little and talked with the girls of her own age, about things at the school in Elder’s Hollow; about Thanksgiving, next week, and about the new teacher who had come to the Hollow that fall and whose “pincher” glasses the girls had all tried on at the first opportunity. Mrs. Magnusson paid Elsa the money for the stockings and remarked that the rain of the night before would likely be the last before snow. Nora Magnusson had a new dress to show Elsa, a dress of black and white checked wool trimmed with red braid and a red anchor on the sleeve. Pretty, Elsa thought, but it would probably be the only dress thin little Nora would have to wear to church and to school all that winter. The Magnussons lived, people often asked how, on a quarter-section of land not more than half of which yielded any crop at all.

At the Fletcher farm Elsa stayed a little longer, to talk with the girls, Lily and Clarice. She had come to look upon Lily as her “particular” friend at school. The Fletcher girls were both pretty. They “crimped” their hair and went to dances, although they were only a year or two older than Elsa. They walked home from school with boys, too, and they giggled a great deal and had secret signs. One of the Whitney boys had been expelled from the school in Elder’s Hollow for saying something to them which the teacher overheard. He was going to school in Sundower now.

Out on the road again, and the wind blew and the clouds gathered and banked and grayed in long furls low on the horizon. The livid, whitish belly on a cloud—that was snow! The mark of winter had been set upon the sky.

And then to Fanny Ipsmiller’s, or rather to Nels Lundquist’s, although people had begun to say the other, so had Fanny taken hold there. It was Fanny Ipsmiller of whom Elsa’s father and mother always spoke mysteriously and in whispers when they knew Elsa was within hearing. They did so even yet, although Reef had told her, quite bluntly, that Fanny had come to Nels Lundquist through a matrimonial agency, as all the district knew. There was some difference of opinion as to why she had never married Nels, but Fanny herself had been heard to say that while she was willing enough to keep his house in order and to look after his growing boy, she would never marry a man as stingy as she had found Nels Lundquist to be within the very first hour she had spent in his house. Although Elsa had learned to accept the situation with only a little wondering now and then, especially when the older girls spoke of it at school, she felt strangely shy when she got down from her seat and went to the door.

Fanny had ordered a bright yellow scarf from Elsa’s mother. When she saw it she exclaimed: “My sakes, ain’t that the pretty thing, now! It’ll be my Christmas present from Nels, that’s what it’ll be! He don’t know it yet, though.” She laughed heartily, a large laugh that seemed to come from every part of her large, spare frame, and strode capably across the floor to admire herself in the mirror, the scarf about her neck. She was back beside Elsa in a moment, tossing the scarf down upon the kitchen table. “You got the stockin’s for little Nels?” Her eyes, and then her large, active hands, pounced upon the stockings Elsa unwrapped. She thrust a hand into one of them, pulled at the ribs, scrutinized them closely. “She looks at them as if she was hungry,” Elsa thought. Just then “little” Nels came in, dragging his feet, soiling the spotless floor. He was Elsa’s age, given to swearing manfully and throwing stones during recess at school. Elsa had always disliked him with all her heart. “I want somethin’ to eat, I do,” he said,

surlily flinging open the cupboard door, closing it without looking in. "Yes, Nelsie, yes, now," Fanny said hurriedly. "But lookit! Lookit the nice stockin's Mrs. Bowers made for ye. Warm an' good an' thick. Them'll keep ye warm, Nelsie boy, won't they?" "I'm hungry, I am!" was his cross response. Fanny smiled indulgently and looked at Elsa. "I'll go over myself with the money to your ma one day next week," she said.

Elsa was out upon the road again, the gray of the air flowing low now, into the brown of the earth—a chill gray that flowed through your flesh and blood on down, down, into the flesh and blood of the earth, she thought. She pressed her arms against her ribs; hunched her head down into her coat collar. That was what it meant to live in Elder's Hollow—you feared the winter. The land was poor between Elder's Hollow and Sundower, and scarcely any one there had enough bedclothes to keep out the cold, or storm windows without broken panes, or fuel to burn all night long, or warm clothes to go out and tend the cattle in. They had all, that day, remarked upon the coming of winter. They had all tasted the bitter taste of the cold, those people who had opened their doors to her. She was of them, she was of the dwellers in Elder's Hollow, living with them a small life close to the seasons, feeling rain and drought, heat and cold, wind of high noon and calm of stars. This it was to live in Elder's Hollow: that you went to bed early in winter to save fuel and light, and that in summer you looked up through the gentle lapping leaves of the pigweed house, up into a dream of blue—up into the Mediterranean Sea, the Bay of Bengal, and the Straits of Magellan.

There was Nate Brazell's house—shack, people called it. A low building, long and narrow, with tin stovepipes, and covered with tar paper and criss-crossed laths. Elsa feared the place. Her mother had gone in to ask Mrs. Brazell for an order, but the woman, who had protruding eyes because of a throat trouble, had looked at her in a frightening way and said no, she had no money for such. Elsa's mother had hurried away for fear of meeting Nate Brazell himself or one of his dogs. He owned a good piece of land and young Nels Lundquist had told at school one day that whenever Nate Brazell buried waste after a slaughter a bag of money went down with it, behind his house. Nobody would think of digging there.

Another little bridge, none too safe, crossed the creek which ran through the heart of the Hollow. The lonely squalor of the place rippled Elsa's flesh with fear and excitement. Here the wind whistled faintly through dead reeds and gnarled stumps, rotted and sour, and here the sharp smell of swamp water moved in the air. This in summer was the odorous haunt of red-winged blackbirds, kingfishers and snipe, and once Elsa and Reef had seen a

hawk swerve down like a scythe and snatch up a water rat from the weft of reeds. The light here now was yellow, receding darkly, weirdly, in through the dense growth of the reeds and grotesquely shaped, upturned roots of trees. The water was clear amber, and deep down you could see the soft black earth bottom, cushiony and faintly veined with rotten roots. Now she saw a wild grapevine trailing over a gray, barkless fallen tree-trunk, a few dried grapes still clinging to its stems. And then, with the white flash of an underwing, a water-fowl flew up out of the yellow murk and away.

Out of Elder's Hollow at last, looking southward upon the fabulous world of the Carews. They too, might say, "It looks like winter," but they would be thinking of their shining cutter and their black-bear robe with the red-wool lining.

It seemed to her that traces of summer still lingered on Carew land: ghost of fresher grass in this pasture; ghost of sunnier sky in that pond. The bright green roof of the white house, too, surmounting its terraced lawn, was a living thing, knowing no autumn death. She scarcely saw the farm buildings from the approach to the house. The terrace and the fir hedge, and the nursery trees that had grown to a good height about the house, obscured them from view on the north. The people in the district had come to speak of the place as the "Carew Mansion" and the Sundower *Clarion* referred to it on occasion as "one of the show places of this county." The house was a bulky structure of white brick, actually rather ugly, Reef had told Elsa. To Elsa it was merely awesome.

She entered the driveway between two rows of young elms that were in the days to come to make a plummy, arched vista, deep with shade, between the house and the road. Then she got down from her seat and walked up the terrace and across the lawn where a few brown leaves drifted, and where she felt the strangeness of a little fountain and a pool beneath it with pink shells and bright stones at the bottom, and the awe of a canvas-canopied garden swing with the delicate scratching of a dry oak leaf across the forsaken seat.

The great brass knocker, shaped like a monk's head, was for one purpose, she knew. Reef had told her about that, too. She stood at the door, squeezing the box of woolen stockings under her arm while the echoes of the knocker thundered within, on and on, it seemed, like great growing waves of sound. Ada, the youngest of Seth Carew's children, a girl of Elsa's own age, came to the door, stared for a moment, then with her slow, shallow smile asked Elsa to come in.

Elsa followed her into the dreamlike living-room of the house where the women of the family were having tea beside an open fire. The farmers about Sundower rarely spoke of the Carew women without mentioning the fact that they always drank tea in the late afternoon, a function that—to them, at least—had small place in the lives of serious women, especially women who lived on a farm. Miss Hildreth had reminded one of them who dared to mention it in her presence that the Carews were really English, only a generation or two removed, and if that was not a sufficient excuse for the habit it was quite possible for the Carew women to drink tea of an afternoon without having to answer to the rest of the world for it. Elsa, although she had been forewarned, sat on the edge of her chair and was abashed. She explained, haltingly, why she had come, fumbling with stiff fingers at the string that bound her parcel, keeping her face toward Miss Hildreth, in whose sparkling eyes there was always something kindly, however blunt and outspoken she might be in conversation. Not for a moment, however, was Elsa unconscious of the frankly staring eyes of the other three women: Mrs. Peter Carew, the wife of Seth's brother, Miss Florence, who was to marry Mahlon Breen in January, and Ada. Elsa had never seen them all together before and the effect was overpowering. She could not help wondering what it would be like if one had to live, day in, day out, under the searching eyes of them all. That would be punishment for your worst sin.

Mrs. Peter Carew was the first to speak when Elsa drew forth a pair of stockings and held them up to view. She put a soft hand to her cheek and exclaimed, "Mercy! We'd have no use for such heavy things!" Florence said, "They make my feet tickle to look at them!" Then Ada, with blue eyes lifting and falling from Elsa to the stockings, asked, "Do you wear those, Elsa?"

It was Hildreth who said sharply, delivering the mortal blow, "Hush! Have some consideration for the child! Come, my dear, have a cup of tea to warm you up before you start back home again."

Elsa laid her parcel aside and accepted the cup which Hildreth gave her. Then, through an intolerable heat that surrounded her, she heard the extraordinary conversation which her coming had unexpectedly provoked. The Carew women had begun to talk about legs. "The Carew women have always had a fine leg," Hildreth declared. As if to add weight to her words, she stretched her foot upon a red plush hassock that lay on the floor beside her chair. She drew her skirt up discreetly and revealed a bottle-shaped limb with a very small ankle. Florence and Ada eagerly displayed their legs of the same general shapeliness, then all three looked to Mrs. Peter Carew. She

lifted her bombazine gores and thrust a neat foot forward. "You have it, Grace!" Hildreth exclaimed in approval. "The Carew leg! I noticed it the first day Peter brought you to the house. I must say, though, I was a little surprised. You haven't the build that usually goes with a good leg." Ada pointed to Elsa's slender limbs, withdrawn under her chair. "Elsa's don't go out where they should. Do they, Aunt Hildreth?" Elsa's cheeks burned, but she thrust her leg out a little to one side to show that she didn't care.

When she got up to go, finally, Elsa felt that she had never before spent a half hour in such utter discomfort. To make matters worse, when she got outside she discovered that she had left her package of stockings there in the warm, richly shadowed living-room, and had to go back and ask for them, striking the door once more with the appalling monk's head.

It was when she was getting into her seat in the democrat that she saw Bayliss Carew, riding down the avenue of young elms, on a horse like Peter Carew's, riding as Peter rode. She felt shy; hurried. Bayliss was nineteen now, one of the grown-ups, really. He had stretched out in the past year and didn't resemble a raspberry any more, Elsa thought, although his cheeks were still tinged with red, as all the Carews' were. He drew up and took off his cap to her. There was something in the gesture that she could not help resent. Why should he take off his cap at all? Reef or Leon wouldn't.

"Hello, Elsa Bowers!" he said quickly. "What's brought you so far from home on a cold day? Had any word from Reef lately?"

"Last week," Elsa replied. "He's all right, I guess. He says he's coming home for Christmas."

"That's good. I'd like to see him. I'll be going to college myself next year. They want to make a doctor out of me. How d'you like my new horse? Aunt Hildreth gave him to me for my birthday. Full-blooded. I'm going to race him in the spring, if they'll let me. Watch him rear!"

He tightened the rein sharply and the animal rose on its hind legs, weaving and dancing. Elsa watched horse and rider for a moment, scarcely knowing whether she admired the picture they made or resented it more. The horse was beautiful. An animal like that would make Reef or Leon proud to the end of their days. But in Bayliss' handling of him there was sheer arrogance. The horse waltzed from side to side on his slender legs until Bayliss, with a sudden jerk of the rein, brought him about so that he stood with his head close to Elsa. From his seat in the saddle, Bayliss then smiled down at her, drawing the rein taut to give a sharper arch to the horse's sleek neck. Elsa's eyes caught sight of blood on the bit.

“Don’t do that!” she said quickly. “You’re hurting his mouth. I can see blood on it now.”

For answer Bayliss continued to smile down at her as he drew the rein still tighter. In a moment Elsa’s anger flamed. She had sat for nearly an hour among the Carew women in the house, where she had writhed helplessly in her resentment for the whole crowd of them. Now Bayliss sat there with a devilish challenge in his eyes. She remembered suddenly the time he had slyly pinched her bare foot under the table when he knew she dared do no more than whimper a little. Now, they were alone in the open, with none of his women present to subdue her with a look. Putting out her hand she seized the bridle-rein just where it joined the ring in the bit. With her other hand she snatched her whip from its place on the dashboard of the democrat.

“Bayliss Carew,” she said, “I told you not to do that. Let go!”

As she spoke she swung her whip out ready to use it if he did not obey her. Smiling still, Bayliss shook the rein loose.

“All right, Elsa Spitfire. You’d think he was your horse. Let him go. I’ll be good. I guess it did hurt him a little, at that.”

But Elsa, with a sense of some new humiliation, had already released her hold upon the bridle and was in her seat with the lines in her hand. As she turned down the narrow avenue of elms, Bayliss waved his cap and smiled. Elsa, glancing back at him, could not help knowing that he looked as handsome and strange then as his uncle, Peter Carew. As though he had been smiling, not really at you, but through you, at something wonderful he had seen beyond. As she reached the road, the horse that Bayliss was riding curved and trotted back up the aisle of young elms, the boy sitting very straight with the fine naked branches etched above him on the sky—and the sky was the color of smoke and ochre from the setting of the sun.

CHAPTER V

The year bore once more to its close and Elsa's mother tacked strips of old garments at the top and at the bottom of doors to keep out the blowing cold, and at night placed old grain sacks, pieces of carpet, anything, at the threshold. There was nothing so real on the prairie as winter, nothing so memorable. Elsa's mother made cough syrup out of onions and brown sugar, a mixture more loathsome than castor oil. Reef was home for the holidays, a strangely different Reef, who sat late into the night with his feet in the oven of the kitchen stove, a heavy book on his knees. He had been glad to see them all, of course, had talked to them for hours about his life in the city, had told them again and again how good it was to be back home with them. And yet, it seemed to Elsa, he was almost a stranger among them. Perhaps it was simply that he had suddenly become a man, with a man's ways and a man's thoughts. Elsa would sit a little apart from him in the kitchen at night and look at him, almost shyly, knowing that another world had already begun to claim him, another life than the life they lived in Elder's Hollow. It made you feel a little sad to think of it, and glad, too—glad for Reef!

A fresh fall of snow, and New Year's came, feathery white, a world of rounded contours. Among the cottonwoods beside the house, long blue shadows lay, and between them, where the sunlight was soft, the snow was the color of ripe peaches. Elsa looked from her window past the miraculous cottonwood grove, polychromed by winter; looked south to where the Carew house stood in its spell. Florence Carew was being married there today, with well-to-do farmers present, and townspeople, and people from the city. Elsa's mother and father had talked about the marriage at the breakfast table that morning. "The Carews have got more than a toe-hold here now," her mother had said. "And why shouldn't they!" her father had retorted. "You're as suspicious as a cat with a piece of meat. Quit your growling!" Elsa's mother was afraid of something, always. Now it was Florence Carew's marriage to Mahlon Breen that made her afraid. Perhaps her father was afraid, too, for all his bluster and his making fun of her mother. Elsa had no fear of the Carews so long as she did not have to go alone to the big house and offer their women woolen stockings, and show her legs. She could close her eyes now and see Florence Carew in her wedding dress—ivory velvet, Fanny Ipsmiller had said it was going to be. Ivory velvet—so many v's! So soft. But Florence was marrying a hard man,

a man who must be old, too, a man who was pale, and tall, and carried a cane, although he didn't lean on it. Elsa had often seen him on the street in Sundower. And Bayliss would be there, looking like the school picture of Sir Galahad standing beside his horse. And Peter Carew would be there, too, laughing so that all the house could hear him.

Elsa turned from the window, frowning, sucking at her under lip. "But, anyhow, I don't like the Carews. It was because they didn't pay enough for the land that Reef lost his . . . I hate them . . . for their fat legs and the way they ride their horses. I hate Bayliss, most of all . . . stepping on your foot when you couldn't say anything about it because of company."

On the last Saturday night before Reef went back to the city, Elsa went with him to skate on the creek in the Hollow. From the house they had seen the bonfires that the skaters who had come down from Sundower had kindled on the ice. There would be others there from the Hollow, too. The Magnusson girls, perhaps, and Lily and Clarice Fletcher, the Whitney boys, and young Nels Lundquist. With Reef beside her Elsa would go among them proudly and without fear. The Whitney boys would know enough to keep their distance. She could even have faced the Carews, but the Carews, of course, had their own pond for skating, near the house. It was enough for them that they should have to go to school with the children in the Hollow. And yet, while they were still some distance from the creek, Elsa was sure she saw Bayliss Carew and his sister, Ada, glide past in the light from one of the fires. She hoped it was not so. Bayliss would want to talk to Reef and she would be left to herself. It was while Reef was helping her with her skates that Bayliss skated down upon them suddenly and caught Reef by the shoulders. "Hello, Reef, old boy!"—"Hello, Bay!" Elsa looked up and saw Bayliss' face shining in the light from the fire. Then she sat tugging at her straps while Reef stood up and talked to him about his work and about the city and about the wedding at New Year's. And Elsa listened, pretending not to listen, thinking fiercely to herself, "There's no call for Bayliss Carew to be so friendly to Reef. He's just *doing* it—to be nice. We don't need it. He doesn't have to be nice to us. Reef doesn't need it, either. If I was Reef, I'd be so nice to him it'd kill him. Reef ought to use some of the big words he uses when he's talking to me. Why doesn't he? I would. I'd be so nice——"

Bayliss was speaking to her now. She looked up and saw him leaning over her, his head bared in mock gallantry, his face almost on a level with her own. "Am I going to have the honor of the first skate?" he asked her in his grand manner. She got up slowly, looking at Reef. "Go ahead, Else. I'll

wait for you,” Reef urged. Elsa felt dizzy, hot and angry, all at once. Reef would be cross if she said no. Besides, it would look as if she was afraid, or shy. She held her hands toward Bayliss and felt herself suddenly swept out upon the ice, away from the light of the fire, and upward along the creek in the pale starlight. Shadows swayed past them, and voices, clear voices talking and laughing and calling to each other along the creek. A short distance ahead of them two figures paused under the naked branches of an overhanging willow. They were two faint shadows against the starlit snow. They became one shadow for a moment and then Elsa heard a girl’s laugh. It was Lily Fletcher’s laugh she heard, Lily Fletcher laughing in a strained way because some one had kissed her there under the naked branches of the willow.

“Let’s go back now,” Elsa said suddenly. It was the first word she had spoken since she had left Reef. Bayliss had not spoken. “You’re afraid of the kissing-tree,” he said then. Elsa caught her under lip between her teeth to keep from replying to that. She was too angry to speak. She could feel her cheeks flame suddenly against the cold air. She swung about and started down the creek without a word. When they were back again in the light of the fire, they found Reef waiting where they had left him. Elsa glided toward him and seized his arm with both hands. Bayliss laughed as he stood before Reef. “She’s not so bad for a little girl, Reef,” he said. “She’ll be a good skater when she grows up.” Doing his best to act the man again, Elsa thought, now that he’s with Reef. She lifted her face and wrinkled her nose a little, disdaining to smile. And now Reef was looking down at her and laughing, too.

“Where *have* you been, Bayliss?” It was Ada who spoke, coming toward them from the other side of the creek and confronting Bayliss with a face that was icy, tight-lipped. “Oh, hello, Reef! Hello, El-sa!” she greeted them with her shallow smile. “I didn’t know you were down. Take me for a skate, Bay. It’ll soon be time to go home.”

Elsa and Reef stood and watched them go off together. “Another Carew woman looking after another Carew man,” Reef said with a slow chuckle. “They sure start early. Come on, Else, let’s skate around and see who’s here.”

Elsa saw how Time possessed the earth, turning it to its own uses; how it released its seasons that they might flow over it, in colors and depths and long, undying murmurs. New Aprils came, and the fields opened, dark and

sweet, under that tide; unflagging Junes with their serene inevitability of growth unshadowed still by a foreknown death; Octobers that stole into the earth with their sad, patient doubt; and the white sleep—all under that tide of the seasons.

She saw, too, that human creatures were one with the earth in this, that Time turned them as well to its own purposes. A certain August had swept by, since when Old-World names that had lain for generations in the soft colors of romance had become livid under bursting night-flares and the reflected light of smoldering ruins. Never a night now but Uncle Fred went up to Sundower for more news of fallen cities and hurtling legions and sunken ships on the seas. Table talk was of events that always led beyond the ken of Elsa's father and her Uncle Fred. Steve Bowers, who had worked his land with all the zeal of his heart and the strength of his body that his children might attain to a fuller life than his own, stood still now and waited, it seemed, even though he went doggedly each day to his work in the fields. Into the eyes of Elsa's mother, eyes that had been straining ever forward to some brighter future, had come a troubled look, bewilderment. Reef, after two years in the law school in the city, was home now, throwing his energies once more into the patch of land in the Hollow, poring over his books at night, nursing a blind hope that he might yet win freedom from the few starved acres that enslaved his father. Elsa herself clung still to her dreams of a life that was not of the Hollow, clung to them fiercely though they seemed to pale at the sound of her father's voice muttering over his paper, "We'll be into it yet—maybe before another year." Or Uncle Fred: "Yeah, and before that!" And her mother, complaining in a monotone as she went about her work, "And our own boys, maybe, singin' an' dyin'—singin' an' dyin'—on the other side of the world!"

Elsa observed, too, that in all that district the Carews alone seemed able to live as if nothing in the outer world could possibly be of interest to them so long as there was peace within their own. She had seen very little of them. Michael, married now to Nellie Block, the minister's daughter, was helping with the management of the great farm, and Bayliss was away at college in the city. Joel, the youngest of the three boys, would be the next to go. Florence, the wife of Mahlon Breen, went to the city twice a year to buy clothes. Ada had been sent to boarding school. Peter Carew it seemed, was always riding off by himself, no one knew where, and returning, very often, only when his wife and Miss Hildreth brought him back. People said that Peter spent too much time among those Bohemians south of Hurley and even Elsa's father had begun to fear that no good would come of it. To Elsa, however, it seemed only fitting that Peter Carew should go riding away by

himself, whatever they might have to say of him. For her, at least, he would never be one of the Carews. He was scarcely of this world, indeed. Had he not come close to her once when she was wading in the creek, and talked to her, and gone off laughing at what she had said, and had he not ridden away and away and floated up among the blue-white clouds that had hung above her in the sky that day? She hated the Carews, but Peter was of another world. She had spoken her mind to that effect one night at the table after she had told them something she had heard about Peter that day at school. Her father had paused and looked at her a full minute in silence. "Don't let your schooling put any wrong ideas into that head of yours, my girl," he had said then. "The Carews are no good."

CHAPTER VI

It was on an evening early in May that Joe Tracy first came to the Bowers farm. He came on foot, edging his way along between the fields, moving northward through the striated radiance of the cottonwoods with the sunset upon them. Elsa, watching from the kitchen window, saw him approach and thought it was Uncle Fred returning from some late visit in the fields. A moment later, however, she knew she was wrong. The man was a shade taller than Uncle Fred, about as tall, she thought, as Uncle Fred must have been before the years had brought his shoulders low under their burden. Besides, he seemed to be singing—no, not singing!

“There’s somebody coming through the fields, from down Carew’s way,” she told her mother who was just finishing her work in the kitchen. “Listen—he’s playing a banjo or something.”

Her mother came to the window and looked over Elsa’s shoulder. “That’s funny,” she mused wonderingly; “anybody walkin’ along like that this time of day with no hat on his head. Looks like he’s come down from the Carews’.”

“He’s going over to where the boys are,” Elsa said.

“Go and wash your hands and take off that apron,” her mother said, with a pretense of unconcern. “I’ll finish up here. You’ve surely done enough for one day. Go on, now.”

She did not say that Elsa, being eighteen now, might expect to have young gentlemen calling on her and that she ought to make herself presentable, in any case. But Elsa remained in the doorway, her eyes scanning the figure of the young man who was talking to Reef and Leon in the yard beside the barn. The stranger seemed a little taller now, although he was not so tall as Bayliss Carew. There was about his body, too, a suggestion of power—not mere physical power, but power of a kind for which Elsa had no name. It was in the spread of his shoulders, in the outward, humorous set of his jaw, even in his crisp, light brown hair. And yet, Elsa thought with swift precision and regret, it was the power of one who was close to the earth, a power that might thrust its way through to the antipodes and not create as much stir in the world of men as another man might create by a turn of the head.

Reef and Leon were coming down the path from the barn, the stranger walking between them. Elsa stepped coolly out of the doorway, into the yard.

“This is Joe Tracy, Else,” Reef said. “He’s working over at the Carews’ place.”

“How-do?” the visitor grinned pleasantly, gripping Elsa’s hand so that she winced. “Got my nerve, eh, marching up on you like this?” He strummed carelessly, a bit self-consciously, on the guitar that hung from a green cord about his neck. “But gosh, I just felt I had to get away somewheres tonight. I ain’t exactly their kind down there. Just one of the hired help. Not that I’m kickin’. Only I just can’t get used to their ways, the women especially. I got to cravin’ for company, just naturally had to have it, that’s all.”

Elsa’s mother came through the doorway lugging two chairs from the kitchen. Leon swept the chairs down to the ground and placed one before their visitor. Elsa and Reef sat down on the steps.

“You play the guitar?” Elsa ventured, a little diffident because of the stranger’s forward manner and his ready talk.

“No, lady,” he told her solemnly. “This is a kitchen stove I carry round just to keep my arm tired.” As he spoke he caught sight of Reef’s wrist. “Been mixin’ into a shootin’ accident, eh?” he observed in the careless manner of one to whom shooting accidents might have been of almost daily occurrence.

“No,” Reef said, with the gentle manner by which he always strove to set an inquirer at ease. “I lost it on an old windmill we had when I was a kid. But I’ve got used to being without it. Don’t miss it, really. You’d be surprised how easily you get used to that kind of thing.”

It was Leon’s turn now. “You sure would. If I could do half with my two fists that Reef does with his one I’d be good enough. Get him to throw a rope for you some time just to prove it.”

“Well, I’m minus two toes on this here foot, myself,” Joe said quickly, and Elsa wondered defensively if it were true. Any show of pity for Reef, however delicate, threw Elsa back upon her old feeling of resentment. She had long since tried to reason herself out of it, had told herself that it was childish, this flying to Reef’s defense without cause, but the habit was too strongly ingrained in her nature. Even now she could see that Joe Tracy had not thought of offering pity to Reef. Joe Tracy wanted to talk. He was telling

them of how he had lived before coming to Sundowner to work for the Carews; telling them, too, in a manner, half singing, half talking, so that they listened to him as men and women must have listened of old, Elsa thought, to some roving minstrel chanting his tales while his fingers played over the strings of his instrument. He was telling them of desert and of mesa and of mountain-top and valley, of barren waste and rolling range and canyons with a thousand sunsets painted on their walls. He was telling them of nights in Mexico and days in the Sierras, of hot noons in the Bad Lands and blizzards in North Dakota. And always as he talked his fingers caressed the strings of his guitar so that the very air about him seemed to breathe softly of music.

He stayed with them for more than two hours, enchanting them, saddening them, making them laugh. Elsa listened in a dream. Her mother had come out upon the porch where she had sat throughout in the thickening shadows. Steve Bowers had not come out, but Uncle Fred had found himself a place under the lilac bush that was coming into bud outside the kitchen window. Now and then he would utter a little chirp of pleasure at something Joe Tracy was telling and they would know that he was still there, old and present.

When Joe took his leave at last, Reef, Leon and Elsa walked a little way south with him. To Elsa it seemed that spring had never come to them as it was coming now. She felt her heart contract and expand with the quick pain of beauty suddenly apprehended, suddenly become tangible. And the little May sounds low in the grass and high in the tender-leaved trees tried themselves on the ear, shyly, gravely.

Down through the dusk of the cottonwood grove they went, Joe Tracy fondling his guitar and singing in a voice so low that Elsa and her brothers had to stay close beside him to catch the words he sang. At the lower end of the grove they halted at Elsa's suggestion that they had gone far enough. Joe stood for a moment looking down at her, strumming softly and smiling so that his strong teeth showed very white in the half-light. "Next time I come down," he said abruptly, "I'm comin' to see you. Is that all right with you?"

She was bewildered for the moment, the more so because Reef and Leon both stood looking at her, their eyes smiling mischievously, waiting for her reply.

"Why—why, I suppose so—if you want to," she said at last.

Joe Tracy did not reply. He turned quickly away, and his voice drifted back to them as they stood among the cottonwoods and watched him until he had become a mere shadow in the dusk that covered the fields:

“Out in Arizona where the bad men are,
Nothing there to guide you but an evening star. . . .”

“Get up to bed with you, now,” Elsa’s mother ordered as soon as she stepped into the house. “And—mind, now—no reading in bed tonight!”

The warning, however, was quite unnecessary. Elsa had little intention of reading in bed. She had too much to think about.

The month closed, the school year ended, and the long summer evenings now seemed to be filled with Joe Tracy and his playing. Elsa felt always while he was there that she was living hurriedly over a moment of treacherous excitement. Some clear intuition bade her fight the emotions which his coming stirred within her. It was a fight against that irresistible force which sought ever to turn back to the earth that which was the earth’s; a struggle to evade the trap which would close her forever within Elder’s Hollow. For, grandly as Joe Tracy talked of the broad world of his journeyings, Elsa knew that where Joe Tracy went there would Elder’s Hollow be. He was as indigenous to the Hollow as the cowslip that grew there now in such yellow profusion; as the nettle that shot up rank and green and burned copper in the summer sun; as the dry tumbleweed blown like some strange ghost of the wind itself, down one of the Hollow’s barren slopes. He was as native to the Hollow as Uncle Fred was, and Uncle Fred in his youth had been just such a one as Joe Tracy, searching out the earth with his body; with his mind, never.

Of an evening they would sit about the Bowers’ back stoop, talking of the war, listening to Joe’s playing, singing in chorus or blending low harmonies with their voices, or listening to some small note of the articulate life of summer—a sleepy fledgling in the poplars, or the soft, scarcely felt intrusion of a bat’s wing curving down out of the darkness and swiftly up again.

It was on such an evening that Joe Tracy brought word that Bayliss Carew had come home for the holidays. Elsa, hearing the news, wondered impatiently if the time would ever come when she would no longer care what a Carew did. What should it matter to her that Bayliss Carew had come back from college?

“Came back on the late train last night,” Joe said, “but he was out early enough this morning. Been doin’ nothing but lookin’ over the colts all day.

Guess he'd rather ride a horse than do any work around the place. He's like Peter that way."

"I guess we'd all rather ride around than push a plow all day," Leon remarked.

"Sure we would," Joe replied. "When I get back on that land of mine in South Dakota I'll do a bit of ridin' around myself. But gosh, there's a limit. I don't expect to have a couple of women bringin' me breakfast up to bed every morning—after they've waited up all hours of the night to see if I get back safe from some devilment I've been pullin' off somewheres. I've never been used to bottle feedin'."

He struck a chord on his guitar and began to sing very softly:

"In the evening, by the moonlight,
You could hear those darkies singin'. . . ."

In a moment they were all singing, feeling their way through the simple harmonies that Joe had taught them. When they had come to the end of the song, they were startled by the sound of hoof-beats, coming from the road. They listened until the rider came into the yard, dismounted, and called out to them. Then they called back, guardedly. It was Bayliss Carew. He emerged out of the darkness and Reef got up to meet him. Elsa, remaining where she was, felt a sudden rush of her old antagonism as she saw him shake hands with Reef. In a moment then she was swept with eagerness, an impatient desire to go out to him in daring, in discovery. When he turned from Reef and caught sight of her sitting on the step he strode forward boldly, drawing off his glove, and shook hands with her.

"Hello, Elsa. Gosh, but you've grown up all of a sudden. I didn't quite expect it. Heard all about you cleaning up in the final exams. I knew you'd show them all how. But for the Lord's sake, don't go and make a schoolmarm out of yourself now!"

"That's what she's going to do," Reef put in.

"Lord, no! Hello, Leon!"

Elsa's mother came shyly out of the kitchen and exchanged a greeting. "You're lookin' fine," she said to Bayliss. "Folks all well at home?" Elsa writhed at the sound of her mother's voice, cautious, reserved, over-courteous.

"Yes. All well, thanks."

Reef asked him to sit down, but Bayliss shook his head. “I’m just on my way up to Sundower to get a letter off on the midnight. I heard you singing down the road. It sounded great.”

His voice seemed to trail away, Elsa thought. It struck her suddenly that there was wistfulness in it. But that, of course, was absurd. Not in a Carew voice. It was condescension rather, or perhaps mere affectation. She sucked her cheeks in slightly, biting at them. Her eyes narrowed and her lashes intertwined in their old unreasoning rage. She pressed her knees together, trembling.

“Wish you’d sing me something,” Bayliss said, his voice whimsical, boyish—the kind of voice, Elsa thought, that no one ever refused whatever it might ask.

They sang for him and he lingered for a moment or two after the song, his eyes upon Elsa, and then upon Joe who sat at her feet. He flicked his gloves against his thigh, sharply, then smoothed them out and drew them on. With a word he was gone then and they sat in silence listening to the sound of the horse’s hoofs growing fainter along the dusty road.

There could be no more singing that evening. There could be no more real talking. Leon was garrulous for a few minutes, then got up suddenly and went off to bed. Reef sat hunched down in his chair, silent, brooding. Elsa sat with her chin in her hands, sickeningly aware of what was going on in Reef’s mind. A Carew had been among them, one for whom there was no mean stinting of the body that the brain might be nourished, no poring alone over second-hand or borrowed books in a tiny farmhouse bedroom. At Elsa’s feet Joe Tracy sat, idly picking at the strings of his guitar, saying nothing. He got up at last, stood looking for a moment at Reef, then turned abruptly away.

“I’m goin’,” he said.

Elsa left her place and walked beside him as far as the road. Neither of them had spoken a word. Suddenly Joe turned and faced her.

“Did you see the way that milk-fed Carew looked at us—I mean at you and me?” he broke out.

“I saw it,” Elsa said.

Joe was silent for several seconds. When he spoke again his voice was less strained. “Listen, Elsa, I’m goin’ away. I’m not goin’ to be able to stay around. I’m goin’ to join up for the big show and get over before they have to drag me out by the heels. I wanted to tell you all about it tonight, but I

couldn't get down to it. I'll come up tomorrow, after I've settled with old Carew. But listen, Elsa. I'm comin' back with enough money in my jeans to start business for myself on that sheep land of mine in S. D. And I'm goin' to take you out there with me."

He had said the same thing to her before, more than once, and she had learned to reply with nothing more than a gentle smile. Once she had told him of Dena Borglund who had gone out there to teach school in a Russian settlement, where you had to wash your face and cook a chicken, if you had a chicken, in the same dish. Tonight, however, she could not smile back at him. He was talking to her in a voice that quickened a deep hunger within her.

"You come out there with me, Elsa. I'd do anything for you. Listen, Elsa, —I'd——"

He must know, Elsa thought, that his voice is rich and low, that he is a quick, powerful part of life beside me here, beating down my resistance. One small, terrible part of life, beating down all the rest. She could not tell him that her whole body at this moment cried out for love, but that love with him would reap no rich harvest. She could not tell him that she had lived long enough in Elder's Hollow to know where young love led—to poverty and squalor and drudgery, and contempt where love had been, or beastliness where love had been.

"We'll make a go of it, Elsa. And say, do you know what it's like to ride over those hills by moonlight? Gosh, you don't know what's pretty till you've seen that! It's like bein'——"

She smiled, tightening her fingers against the palms of her hands. This, she thought vehemently, was the Hollow claiming its own. And oh, how easy it would be to yield to that claim! To say, "Yes, I'll go, because there's romance in you, Joe Tracy"—knowing all the while how romance fled. But she could still shake her head at him, because in his humility he waited for a sign from her. Had he not waited, she thought, she might have forgotten many things.

The sun blistered the prairie for two weeks. In the middle of July, Nels Lundquist, at work in his fields, suffered sunstroke and died. Thereafter the burden of the Lundquist farm lay upon Fanny Ipsmiller with only the young Nels to help her.

On an evening when the sunset was a smoky flame on the horizon, Uncle Fred said, "Now it will rain!"

It *did* rain. It began with a thunderstorm early the following evening, then settled to a steady downpour that lasted for three days. After that it rained every day a little, showers that kept the air thick and the fields soggy. The days were sodden and sultry, the night humid and sticky. A pall of dark expectancy hung over the world.

Elsa had been helping her mother with the preserving of garden truck and of berries gathered in the Hollow. The task was almost at an end. "One more day and we'll be just about through with it," her mother said. "And won't I be glad! I never experienced the like of it. Is the table ready? I'm done! I think I saw Pa comin' up from the creek a while ago. He'll be in in a minute."

Elsa filled the large glass pitcher with cool water brought fresh from the well. "The table's all set," she said, and carried the pitcher into the inner room where she had spread a cold supper for the family. For a moment she stood back and surveyed the table to see that nothing was wanting. Then she sat down and dried her face with her apron. On the table before her the glass pitcher was already covered with a thin veil of dew. Absently she leaned forward and wrote with one finger on the glass: "J. T." Then, at the sound of her father and Reef talking as they came up the path from the barn, she hurriedly brushed her hand over the side of the pitcher and went into the kitchen.

As she entered the kitchen she saw her father come into the doorway and pause with a wisp of nearly ripe wheat in his hand. At the look on his brown face, Elsa's heart stopped coldly. He threw the long spears on the floor and looked at Elsa and her mother. The heads of grain were almost black.

"Rust, Steve!" Elsa's mother said.

"Rust," said Steve Bowers. "Another week of this damned weather and we might as well sell out."

He passed straight into the inner room and sank down upon a chair where he sat utterly still, fingering the crocheted fringe on the edge of the chair, staring before him at the floor, blankly.

There was not enough harvest that year to pay for the work of cutting and threshing it. There was nothing with which to meet the demands of Mahlon Breen when he spoke to Steve Bowers on the street in Sundowner one day in September and reminded him that his note would be due in a

couple of days. When Seth Carew offered to pay cash for the quarter-section of the Bowers land adjoining his own, Mahlon Breen congratulated Steve on having a neighbor who was so willing and so able to help him in time of difficulty. That, indeed, was what Steve Bowers told his wife that night when he confessed to having sold another hundred and sixty acres of his best land to Seth Carew. Elsa's mother folded her hands in her apron and wept, then roused herself suddenly and poured her wrath in turn upon her husband and Seth Carew and Mahlon Breen. After that she folded her hands in her apron once more and wept.

Elsa went off silently to bed, where she lay awake for hours in the darkness of her room. For months she had been dreaming of a course in the State university, now that she had come to the end of her work in the high school in Sundower. Her father and mother had spoken of it, guardedly but hopefully—in another year, perhaps. But another year would pass—and another and another—and the dream must fade. Such dreams were only for people like the Carews. She might have known.

CHAPTER VII

From the window closest to her desk in the schoolroom Elsa could see the indefinite gray blur that March made of the Hollow; the soft, unkempt look of thaw was upon all that landscape. Leading southward to the smudge of brushwood near the creek were great rugged patches of snow with the wet brown of the earth showing in between. Elsa thought those patches might well be the staggering footsteps of some cloud-high giant drunk on the mad March wind of this day. She glanced down at the children before her and thought how very indiscreet it would be to impart her imagining to them. There were one or two among them, perhaps, who would not stare at her and report at home that the teacher had been seeing drunken giants stalking through the Hollow.

A hand waved urgently in the middle of the room.

“I can’t find Zanzibar on my map.”

“Bring your geography to me, then.”

It was Doc Petersen’s youngest who came up to Elsa with his book clutched in a grimy fist. Elsa took the book and looked for Zanzibar.

“You have a blot of ink on it,” she told the youngster patiently. “No wonder you can’t find it. Take my book and be more careful with it.”

Zanzibar, Zanzibar! A blot of ink and Zanzibar was no more. It was two years now since Elsa had been obliged to forget her dreams of a course in the State University and content herself with a short term at normal school which would enable her to teach. And then—the superintendent had given her the school in Elder’s Hollow because she was familiar with the life there. Beating down the power that had arisen within her, the power to live and accomplish limitless things in her time, she had taken the school in the Hollow, comforting herself with the thought that she could live at home and give most of her earnings to Reef. It would be something, at any rate, to help Reef win his way into another world, a world that was not Elder’s Hollow. She had protested very little, nursing a deep bitterness within her heart. Even that had gone now, leaving only a calm wonder at the way in which the Bowers family turned back ever to be a part of Elder’s Hollow, part of its erratic soil, its small harvests, its pitiful vanity in the unmarked beauty of a little creek, a little hill, a wind-haunted clump of willows.

Zanzibar—a blot of ink and Zanzibar was no more!

She picked up another composition paper out of the pile before her on the desk. Della Magnusson's, a child of the eldest Magnusson boy,—Della, old enough now to be writing compositions at school! Time, designing slowly, swiftly; Time, destroying slowly, swiftly; Time holding, possessing the earth in its tender indifference. Elsa saw for a moment only a blank on the paper. She pressed a thumb and forefinger on her eyelids then, and read: "The earth is happy because it is spring and the war is over . . ." She read on to the end, then placed a red *A* at the top of the page, smiling faintly at the irony in the mark.

". . . because it is spring and the war is over—over!" Elsa repeated to herself, looking out of the window at the loose gray of the sky. Yes, the war was over, and Bayliss and Joel Carew had come home again. All Sundower had looked forward to their coming. There had been a crowd at the station to meet them and to do honor to Bayliss, who had won a medal for distinguished service in the field. Others had come home on the same train, one of the Petersen boys and the eldest Whitney, and two boys from south of Hurley. Elsa had gone to the station with Reef and had lingered on the outskirts of the noisy crowd where they had listened to the tribute paid to the gallant and dashing Carews. Yes, Elsa had admitted bitterly, they had undoubtedly been brave; spectacularly, recklessly brave. Bayliss looked every inch the hero. Joel limped, a little dramatically perhaps, but looked very smart in his aviator's uniform. It had been a magnificent opportunity for them. But she could not keep her eyes from Reef standing beside her, one hand apparently in the pocket of his coat, his eyes fixed darkly on the face of Bayliss Carew. Why had Bayliss Carew come home? Why had he not died out there? In the next moment she had been shocked at her own violence of feeling. For almost two years she had thought of the dangers he faced, the sacrifices he was making, the heroic indifference to life which carried him into the fight. Why should one glimpse of him blot out all she had been thinking and leave with her only her petty enmity? Why, moreover, did her hatred of Bayliss Carew cause her to suffer, agonizingly? What perverse impulse made her long to step up to him where he stood in the light of the torches and smiled down at the cheering crowds—step up boldly and strike him so that the smile might vanish before a frown of surprise? At the back of her brain something murmured insistently that this was no petty emotion, this old feeling for Bayliss Carew; that it was as much a part of the great scheme of things as any clash of armies in the field; that it was the bitter whirling flame out of which new worlds took shape and were sent spinning into space.

It was in no such violent mood that she had thought of Joe Tracy during these two years. Joe had not come back with the others. He had written to tell her that he might not be back for many months yet—a small army was being held until the skies had cleared—but he would be back, and he would have money in his pockets, and Sundower would see him just long enough to know that he had come and carried off the young teacher from the school in the Hollow, and then they would go riding over the hills in South Dakota in the moonlight and go singing down through the days and nights forever! Poor, singing, dreaming Joe Tracy! Elsa never thought of him but her blood warmed with quick desire for him, for his singing and his joyous, physical music, his earthy strength and his smiling complacency. But one would rather hate Bayliss Carew than love Joe Tracy.

“. . . because it is spring and the war is over.” Elsa glanced at the clock on her desk. It was almost four o’clock and she had intended to write another letter to the school board reminding them that nothing had been done yet to stop the leak in the roof. She looked up at the ceiling, at a large gray spot that showed where the rain had come through. It had come to this, then, that life of hers which two years ago had seemed at bursting point with imaginative fullness—she was concerned with writing letters asking meekly that something be done about a leaking roof of a schoolhouse before the plaster from the ceiling should come down upon the heads of the children.

Out in the raw air, which was sharpening now toward evening, Elsa drew her coat collar more closely about her throat, and hurried northward in the direction of the Phillips farm. She had intended calling to see old Sarah Phillips on her way home and was already regretting that she had not left it for another day. It was only a step out of the way, however, and Elsa’s mother had asked her to get the fuchsia slips which old Sarah had promised her for her window-boxes.

Jim Phillips’ wife met her at the door and, busy with preparing supper, led her immediately to the sitting-room where old Sarah sat in her perpetual rocking-chair. “Here’s Elsa Bowers come to see you,” she called from the doorway. “Go on in, Elsa, and I’ll get on with the supper.” Elsa went in and shook hands with the old woman who turned toward her with her sightless eyes now veiled behind black glasses. “It’s Elsa, Mother Phillips,” she said, but the old woman gave her little heed. She shook her head and intoned slowly, oracularly: “The door opened and I smelt snow. Yes, I smelt snow. . . .” She had become very ancient in the past two or three years, Elsa thought. She had lost touch with the immediate. She was wandering blindly

in a world that knew neither time nor place, moving through a maze of broken memories, twilight shadows. It was only natural that she should say to Elsa, confusing her now with some one else, "You've had boys yourself. You know what they be. Before my hands got so stiff with the rheumatiz I sat from morn till night mendin' and knittin', mendin' and knittin'. . . ." She sat nodding in her rocking-chair beside the window, beside her fuchsias and her geraniums, maundering down through her eighty-six years with sentences groping and absurd—a voice only, a frail rhythm only, upon the ear of life. ". . . but I hear 'em talkin' now—talkin' about that Nate Brazell lettin' his wife die on his hands and him hidin' his money in the night. And I hear 'em talkin' about that old fool, Fanny Ipsmiller, puttin' on frills and feathers to catch young Nels—frills and feathers and what-not—prinkin' to catch young Nels and him laughin' in her face, the old fool! It's a cryin' shame—and it's God's mercy I can't see what's goin' on any more—and the Carews carryin' on the way they be. . . ." Her voice trailed away from fact into a labyrinth wrought out of her decaying mind. Elsa listened for a while, then reminded the old woman of the fuchsia slips. Sarah clipped them for her, her gnarled hands going unerringly among the plants with her scissors.

Out again in the deepening dusk with a sharp swirl of snow in the air, Elsa turned homeward. Before her, to the southward, the bleak, swarthy tangle of brushwood marked the shores of the creek, and a fear of it coursed through her, fear for herself and her own life, which had always been so precious, so full of wonder. Yonder was the light in the Lundquist window, marking the place where Fanny Ipsmiller lived. Elsa thought of her with pity now—she had, indeed, become the laughing-stock of the district. Farther away, on the left side of the road, was the light in Brazell's place, where Nate's wife lay slowly dying because she did not want to live. Fanny Ipsmiller and Nate Brazell's wife, each sharing in her own fashion the heritage of the Hollow. There was something cruel, something predatory about the earth here—it sucked human life down into its own darkness, its own oblivion. She shivered and drew her coat more closely about her.

Some one was standing at the Lundquist gate—Fanny Ipsmiller. She called out to Elsa, recognizing her as she hurried along the road: "That you, Elsa Bowers? Walkin' home and it commencin' to snow! Better come in for a cup o' tea to warm yourself. I got that new crochet pattern for your ma, too." In Fanny's warm kitchen Elsa drank tea and watched the large-boned woman going about her work while Nels and his hired man sat drying their feet in the oven. Fanny was between forty and forty-five now, increasingly sprightly and increasingly deaf. "I hear them Carews 've been raisin' hell again south o' Hurley," Nels told Elsa. "Chet Bloom was tellin' me they had

some celebration down there with them Bohemian tripe. Guess the girls down there didn't forget their swell friends when they went to France, eh? Chet says they got drunk an' old man Wolf got nasty. Tried to kick Joel out o' the house for playin' rough with his girl Zenka. Guess he might 'a' kicked Bay out, too, only Bay's too slick for them. He ain't gettin' caught. Seems they were havin' a whale of a time Saturday night. . . ." Fanny came across the floor and held a large hand to one ear as she inclined her head toward Nels. "What's that you said, Nelsie boy?" she asked, beaming down upon him. "Shut up, you old turnip!" Nels addressed Fanny parenthetically, his loose mouth drawn to one side, then continued talking to Elsa without any interruption in the current of his speech. ". . . havin' a whale of a time Saturday night when the old man got ugly an' threatened to shoot up the place if they didn't get . . ." Fanny looked at Elsa, smilingly bewildered. "Which?" she asked meekly. Nels went on with his story until Elsa could listen to no more of it. She set her cup aside and left abruptly, fearing that Nels might try to lay his clammy hand upon her if she stayed. It was not so much his filthy gossip that depressed her as she closed the door behind her and hurried into the road; it was rather the unlovely spectacle of Fanny Ipsmiller fiercely, possessively in love with the boorish Nels whom she had toiled for in the harsh winters and the broiling summers of twenty years. And now dark stories were beginning to be whispered about concerning her, and she was ridiculous in over-gay clothes, so that the very young and the very old pointed their fingers at her.

Up a little lift in the road, and there was the light of home. She was glad she had not gone to visit Nate Brazell's wife. She had been thinking about it for a week, but she had seen enough of the Hollow for one day. The thought of Nels Lundquist lay upon her like something physical, something dead and cold and heavy that sent chills creeping over her body. With the light of home before her, Elsa ran, her heart cheering in the dim radiance with the sense of shelter and warmth awaiting her, shelter and warmth from the bleak desolation of the Hollow. There were few who escaped that desolation, she thought. There was Clarice Fletcher, working for a pittance, long hours, in a dingy grocery store in Hurley, and pretty Lily, toiling all day on the farm at home and crimping her hair to go to dances at night and angle for a husband. She thought of the Magnusson girls, married now to dull clods of farmers and struggling in more sordid poverty even than they had known at home. Where was the escape?

There was a commotion about the barnyard where Leon and Uncle Fred were calling out cheerfully to each other in the cold dusk, laughing and shouting as they went about their chores, tending the livestock in the warm

glow of their lanterns. The familiar, reassuring sound of animals moving heavily about in the half darkness came to Elsa, dissipating her sense of dread, restoring her spirit. Friday night was always a good night at home. It was the end of the week for her, and Reef always managed to get home early from the creamery in Sundower where he had been working five days of every week throughout the winter—studying far into the night to prepare himself for his final examinations in the summer. Some unaccountable excitement seized Elsa and sent her racing up the pathway to the house. As she threw open the door the warm odors of the kitchen enveloped her.

“Hello, Mumsey!” she greeted her mother, flinging her coat open and jerking her hat from her head.

Her mother looked up from her work beside the stove. “You’re late,” she said. “Must ’a’ stayed at the Phillips’ till it was dark. I was beginnin’ to worry about you. Reef’s home.” There was a note of anxiety in her voice.

“Reef home? Already? Nothing wrong, is there?” Elsa asked.

“He’s complainin’ again of that headache. I keep tellin’ him it’s no good, this burnin’ the candle at both ends, the way he’s been doin’. But of course he won’t listen to me.” Elsa glanced into the sitting-room where her father sat reading the paper. “He’s lyin’ down—up in his room,” her mother said. “Don’t worry him till it’s time for supper.”

In a few minutes Leon and Uncle Fred came in from the barn and Elsa’s mother began carrying the steaming food to the table in the inner room. “Go up and tell Reef,” she said to Elsa. “Come on, Steve, now.”

Elsa hurried up the stairs, glanced along the narrow hall to where a patch of light lay on the floor beside Reef’s open doorway, then stole quietly along and looked into the room. Reef was sitting before his small table, a book open in his hands.

“I was afraid you might be asleep,” she said, as he looked up. “Don’t you feel like having a little supper?”

“I feel all right,” Reef replied in a voice that was strained, unnatural. “I just had one of my darned old headaches, that’s all. I’m not hungry. I think I’ll feel better if I don’t eat anything. Go ahead and have supper. I’ll come down later.”

He turned again to his reading and Elsa went downstairs. In spite of Reef’s absence, the family was in high spirits at the table that night. Steve Bowers had just been reading a bright forecast for the coming season and was unusually gay. He teased Elsa about Joe Tracy and offered to make a

preacher out of Leon if the crops were good next fall. Even Uncle Fred caught some of the levity of the occasion and gave it as his opinion, after a careful study of the “bumps” on Leon’s head, that the youngest of the Bowers family would probably spend the greater part of his life in prisoner’s garb. “He has the criminal’s head,” he pronounced in all seriousness, casting a furtive wink at Steve who sat smiling at the head of the table, “like you see in the city papers. If there was to be a murder done hereabouts, in the Hollow, now—on a night like this, let’s say——”

Without warning, a loud crash sounded in Reef’s room above them, and then a shrill cry in a voice that was unlike Reef’s. Steve Bowers sprang from his place and rushed upstairs, Elsa and her mother following him. In the flare of a lighted match they saw the lamp lying in fragments on the floor, the kerosene soaking into the braided rag rug. Reef was flung face downward on his bed, his body rigid, his fingers clutching convulsively at the patchwork quilt. While Steve hurried away for Doctor Olson, Elsa and her mother undressed Reef, got his feet into a hot mustard bath, and put him to bed as quietly as possible. He made no protest, offered no resistance. He was in utter collapse. He lay trembling in his bed, saying nothing, his eyes closed, apparently unaware of their presence in the room with him.

They waited for Doctor Olson, Elsa’s mother sitting in Reef’s chair, weeping silently with her hands gathered in her apron, Elsa standing rigid at the foot of the bed, complete despair seizing her mind, distorting the already distorted shape of life, leaving nothing but havoc. Where now was the shelter, the escape from the desolation that was the Hollow? She thought of herself romancing about Joe Tracy, painting him in the dazzling colors of her own fancy, desiring him in the empty, lonely, meager world that was her world. She thought of the warmth, the light contentment, that had enfolded them at the supper table, of her father’s good-natured banter, of Uncle Fred’s rough humor, of her own plans to make taffy as soon as the supper dishes were washed, and to have Reef come down and help them pull it. She had called that shelter, escape. And now—this! Through her half-closed eyes she peered at the window above Reef’s table, peered at it as though she expected to find some light shining out there in the darkness.

Extraordinarily, Bayliss Carew came into her mind. She considered him with a warm suffusing anger, a kindling of vitality. The thought of Bayliss invigorated her, restored in her a challenging, bright courage, fearlessness of the Hollow, and renewed her desire to live boundlessly, magnificently. She thought of him as she had seen him last, that night when he had stood up in the flare of the torches amid the cheers of the crowd, the old arrogant smile

in his eyes. At this instant, for the first time, she knew that her inner conflict with Bayliss Carew was the motivating force of her life, it had become the very pulse of her being. Thinking of him, she could do anything—be anything! She pressed her hands against her throat, her cheeks. Tears flooded her eyes, tears of vehement, burning life. She turned quickly away and went downstairs, leaving her mother to wait beside Reef's bed while she and Leon cleared the table and washed the dishes. And in the corner of the kitchen next the stove Uncle Fred sat shaking his head slowly and moaning to himself, a high, thin sound that mingled dolefully with the whispering of the wind in the cottonwoods.

CHAPTER VIII

Now it was April again and rains wandered darkly in the low skies, freshets ran with a small chuckling sound into the swollen creek in the Hollow, and every day over the wet bursting fields great flocks of birds swept down like a startling rush of wind, settled a moment and curved up again on their way northward. In an early thunderstorm which Uncle Fred said predicted a good season for the farmers, the Norwegian Lutheran church over in the Scandinavian settlement east of Sundower was struck by lightning and burned to the ground.

Reef had been compelled to remain in bed for nearly a month with his books out of reach until his frayed nerves had mended. Elsa had marveled at the patience with which he lay day after day looking out of his window, his eyes even in his weakened condition not for a moment relinquishing their look of determination. Despite his collapse he would go up for examination in the summer. With April in the air he was able to go about now. Twice he had gone as far as the Fletcher place to spend the evening with Clarice who had come home from Hurley to help with the spring planting.

On the last Friday afternoon in April, after Elsa had dismissed the children and the joyous clamor of their departure had died away, Bayliss Carew came to the school in the Hollow and stood filling the doorway, his irritating smile turned upon Elsa where she sat working at her desk.

“You’re going to ruin those eyes of yours working in this light, Elsa Bowers,” he said. “Don’t you know it’s after hours? It’s nearly five o’clock.”

Elsa looked at him, wrinkling her nose contemptuously, her eyes luminous with their old challenge. He must know how tall and straight and handsome he looked standing there in the framed light of the doorway with all April in the soft sky behind him. “Somebody has to do the work in Elder’s Hollow, Bayliss Carew,” she retorted crisply.

“I might argue that with you, too, if I were in a mood for arguments,” he said. “I just don’t see how you can sit here for a whole hour when you might _____”

“What’s wrong with it?” she interrupted him. “I like it.” It was pride that made you lie when you talked to Bayliss Carew. Years ago he had asked her how old she was. He had smiled at her then; he was smiling at her now.

“You *don't* like it, Elsa Bowers. You can't tell me you get any thrill out of the smell of chalk and ink and dust and old overshoes and stale dinner pails.”

There had been a day when Bayliss Carew had sat looking up at the cracked paper on the ceiling of the Bowers sitting-room. When you lived in the Hollow you accepted such things as cracked wallpaper and the smell of stale dinner pails—or you rebelled against them. It was all the same. You didn't ignore them.

“When I leave here,” she confessed evasively, “I've got to take some oranges over to Mrs. Brazell.”

He was laughing now. “I see. You'd rather have this than face Nate's dogs, eh? Well, come on out. I'll see that you get past the dogs and past Nate, too, if it must be done. Come on—I'm waiting for you.”

She got up from her desk and put on her hat and coat. Behind the sense of relief at having some one with her when she went to visit Nate Brazell's wife, there was a feeling of annoyance that it had to be Bayliss Carew. All day she had looked forward with dread to the visit, but she would have faced Nate Brazell and his dogs twenty times rather than feel herself under obligation to a Carew.

She paused on the schoolhouse steps and looked down to where Bayliss stood between two of the Carew horses. “I'm getting Fleta used to the feel of a saddle on her back,” he called up to her, gently stroking the arched neck of the smaller horse. The animal was a beauty, slender, shining, dainty-limbed, with deep, nervous eyes. To ride her would be like sailing the wind. There had never been such an animal in the Bowers stables. Elsa watched him release the bridles from the hitching-post and lead the horses through the gate. Then she joined him on the road and they started together in the direction of the Brazell place.

Elsa's eyes, glancing back at the horses, narrowed with a memory. “I have sometimes wondered how it is that you seem to think so much of your horses,” she said evenly, her lips drawn tight.

She felt his quizzical look upon her. “*Seem* to? Why—a good horse—” he began, then hesitated. “Just what are you coming to?” he demanded.

She could not help the touch of scorn in her laugh. “Oh, I was just thinking of an exhibition of horsemanship you gave for my special benefit a few years ago. I've never quite forgotten that—and never quite forgiven it, either.”

His laugh nettled her. "I haven't forgotten it, either," he said. "When you were out of sight that day I got down and kissed that horse and fed him three apples. *He* forgave me."

Elsa looked moodily ahead at the soot-colored shacks margining on the twilight Hollow. Nate's dogs had already begun their clamor, a sinister howling in the gray void. Elsa spoke scarcely a word until they reached the crude gate in front of the house. There's a woman lying in there, dying, she thought darkly to herself, and would have spoken had not Nate Brazell himself come out of the house at that moment.

"Hello, Nate!" Bayliss greeted him as he fastened the horses outside the gate and started up the path with Elsa. Nate looked at them in the manner he had out of the corners of his eyes, his head turned to one side in an attitude of listening rather than of looking. He wore an old cap on one side of his closely matted hair and a red cotton handkerchief knotted about his throat. He thrust his hands into his pockets and spat deliberately before he spoke.

"You over to see my ol' woman, I reckon, eh?" he observed with a gross laugh. "Well, there ain't much left of her to look at. . . ." He continued muttering as he moved around the corner to the rear of the house, leaving them to let themselves in.

As they stepped to the door, however, it was opened by a girl whom Elsa had never seen before. In a soft voice, slightly accented, she bade them enter. In the kitchen behind her was a younger girl, of ten or twelve. Elsa stared at the elder of the two. She was different from any creature she had ever seen. Her coloring was unforgettable. There was the brownness of dark honey in her skin. Her hair was black and abundant, hanging forward in two loose braids which gave her an almost childish look that was belied by her fully developed body. Elsa thought quickly that her cheeks and mouth were careless splashes of crimson in the flat oval of her face.

The girl took little notice of Elsa, but her dark eyes widened upon Bayliss, then narrowed slightly, seeming to draw their brilliance back under their lids. Her lips parted in a frank smile of recognition.

"Well—hello! Look who's here!" Bayliss cried, giving one hand to the elder of the girls, the other to the younger, who came forward shyly and made a slight curtsy. "Elsa, this is Zenka Wolf," he said, indicating the older, "and this is little Maria. Girls, this is the teacher, Miss Bowers. Now, what in the world are you doing here?"

“I come to help here, for Meester Bra-zell,” Zenka told him, looking up from under her heavy lids. “Maria, she come here with me this morning. You come to see Meesis Brazell?” She made a gracious gesture of her hand to indicate the way to Mrs. Brazell’s room. With a word to Bayliss, Elsa went into the inner dimness of the house. Already the place bore a cleanliness and freshness which had been markedly absent since Nate’s wife had taken to bed.

In the dim light that fell on a square patch of window, Elsa saw the wan smile of gratitude with which the woman greeted her. “You find me alive,” Mrs. Brazell said, her labored breathing too loud for the small room in which she lay. “Well—I live in spite of them. I live because I won’t die—I won’t!” Elsa took the wasted hand that lay on the bedspread and sat down on the chair beside the bed. “I know what they say—what they all say. They say I’d be better dead than the way I am. I know it. Pityin’ me an’ wishin’ me dead an’ out of the way! That’s the way with the world. When you’re no more use to anybody—out of the way with her! But I’m goin’ to stay here. . . .” Elsa sought for something she might say, something quieting to give meaning to the few precious minutes of her visit, but the woman talked on, eagerly, hungrily, rebelliously, her thin fingers gripping Elsa’s with the fierce tenacity of life. In a moment her strength had spent itself. She ceased speaking suddenly and tears streamed from her eyes. Elsa leaned toward her in silence and patted her hand. When the woman spoke again her voice was broken and resigned. “But what’s the use? That Doctor Olson—he was here again yesterday. It was the same story all over again—if I got an operation I would pull through. But that’s talk. Go to the city—to the hospital there—for a month, mebbe. And who’s to pay for that, I’d like to know? Anyhow what’s the good of it? With him like he is—I guess I don’t want to live much. He got mad when Olson said he would send that Bohemian Zenka to clean up for me. I ain’t no good here—any more. Sometimes, layin’ and listenin’ to the eaves drippin’—I think to myself, spring’s here—an’ I feel a little like livin’ again. It would be nice to be out in the fields again. But after that—what? There’s always another winter for folks like me. I don’t want to see another winter here. I’m gettin’ old too.”

Elsa did not stay long. She gave the woman the oranges, then with a promise to come back again soon she stole out of the room as quietly as she had come in.

In the kitchen again, she found Bayliss teasing the younger of the girls. He was holding his clenched hands out before him and Maria was trying to guess which one held the coin. But Elsa found herself with obscure curiosity

seeking out the other girl, who had begun to prepare supper. Zenka's face was blank with an unobtrusive servility, but Elsa felt extraordinarily excited by that look. She had seen something of the people who, quite erroneously, had gone under the name of Bohemians in Sundower and Hurley. The men drove lean horses, the older women wore shawls about their heads in all seasons of the year, the young girls went bareheaded even in bitter weather. But they were picturesque in their poverty, loved to dance and drink and sing the wild songs of their youth learned in another land. In a district where gossip was rife, Elsa had heard tales of how the young men of Hurley and Sundower sought their Saturday night entertainment in the Bohemian settlement. Reef had told her all about it one day, quite frankly, when she had asked him about it. She had heard her father and Uncle Fred speak of it, somewhat guardedly, when they talked of Peter Carew at the table. There had been that day, too, when Nels Lundquist had sat drying his feet in the oven . . . telling the truth, then, though she had run from the house to escape it!

She hurried away, leaving Bayliss to follow her, glancing back only when she had reached the road. The girls stood in the doorway waving their hands, a curious, reflective smile on the face of Zenka, the elder one.

Out upon the road leading westward along the Hollow, Elsa's heart throbbed with a confusion of emotions. What did it matter to her what a Carew had done? An angry excitement rippled through her blood so that she could not speak, could not listen to what Bayliss was telling her. Suddenly he stopped and slapped the reins across his leather glove. "Elsa," he said, "why the devil don't you tell me to get back to where I belong and leave you alone?"

Elsa's cheeks grew suddenly warm against the cool air. "Because it really doesn't matter to me what you do, Bayliss Carew," she retorted.

"Well—it matters to me," he said quickly. "I know what's on your mind, and if you won't tell me, I'll tell you. It's that girl, Zenka."

She would have told him that she didn't want to hear anything he might have to say about Zenka, but he hurried on before she could speak.

"The fact is, Elsa, you've made up your mind that I belong to a pretty rotten crowd."

She felt him eyeing her narrowly.

"If I had known she was there this afternoon, I wouldn't have gone down there with you," he went on. "I guess I'm just coward enough to avoid

trouble when I can. But I did go—and she was there—and I’m going to face it out.”

Her anger flamed suddenly. “I know all I want to know about it!” she told him. “You don’t have to answer to me for——”

“I’m not trying to answer to you for it—not now,” he interrupted. “Everything you’ve heard is true—and more, probably. What of it? The girl is healthy—she’s clean—and she’s pretty. No man could demand more in a girl of her kind.”

She was left inarticulate by the heartless sweep of his reasoning. She went rigid before him. Finally she drew words out of the wild chaos of her thoughts. “Spoken—like a Carew!” she flamed bitterly. As she spoke the old desire to strike his smiling face came over her, but her fury left her helpless. She turned quickly away and started off along the road, barely aware that he was following her with quickened pace. When his voice spoke close beside her again it was the voice of a stranger, sounding out of the distance, falling dully on her mind.

“I am a Carew. You think they’re a rotten lot. We’ll not argue that now. I didn’t come out to talk about the Carews. What’s more, I lied to you when I said I came out to get Fleta used to the feel of a saddle on her back. I came out to tell you that I’m going away again—that I wouldn’t have come back here at all if it hadn’t been for you. I don’t want to fight with you—we’ve always done that—but I’d rather fight with you than love any other woman I’ve ever known. I didn’t know that till I got away from you—till I had nothing but the memory of that faint blue vein running down the side of your cheek. That’ll sound silly to you now. But it’s true. That’s what I came out to tell you. I’ve picked a bad time for it—but it had to be said—and I have no other time left.”

Amazement and bewilderment swept over her. Bayliss Carew was humble to the point of self-abasement, in the tone of his voice, in the dark, brooding look which he turned upon her and which she could not help feeling although she did not dare to look at him lest she should break into hysterical tears.

“I’m not even asking you to say anything about it just now,” he went on. “I’m going away tomorrow to get ready for some special work in my course during the summer. I’m going to try to catch up a little. But I’ll take a run home in the Fall and at Christmas and I’m coming to see you.”

Once more Elsa was confronted by the flat, beautiful animal face of Zenka, hanging in memory before her like some rare intaglio. She turned upon him with a sharp rush of angry color. Bayliss Carew would be coming home in the Fall—and at Christmas—to see. . . . What a perverse fool she was, making herself ridiculous in his eyes! She checked the words that came to her. She became very straight and quiet then, and moved away slowly. Beside her, Bayliss walked with his eyes upon the road, saying nothing.

By the time they had come to the Bowers gate Elsa was in control of herself. Her anger had been a little absurd, too revealing. She looked up at him and smiled with some impudence. “Good-by,” she said lightly. “And I do like to fight with you, Bayliss Carew.”

He did not speak for a moment. He caught Fleta’s bridle and drew the filly closer to him, stroking her sleek side. Then he looked at Elsa, smiling but without arrogance—a shy look such as she had never before seen in his face.

“Will you do just one little thing for me, Elsa?” he asked slowly. “I want you to take Fleta and ride her this summer—while I’m away. You have no idea how I’d like you to have her.”

Elsa flushed and bit her lip. *Guld hesten og guld sadelen!* Della Magnusson had sung a Norse song at school:

Your golden horse and saddle
I will not have—ah, no!
Give them to your princess fair—
Let me with nothing go!

She strove to smile. Her heart beat intolerably. She put her hand to her throat where a sudden aching had come. Then she shook her head because she could not speak, turned abruptly away and raced up the pathway to the house.

CHAPTER IX

The year matured bountifully. Beside the fences and along the creek wild fruit ripened in abundance. The lush green of the fields became a rich gold that swayed sturdily under the wind and fell at last before the hands of the reapers. Clamor of wild fowl filled the nights in the Hollow and the rank sedges browned and stiffened against the coming of another winter. In late October Nate Brazell's wife died and Elsa's mother and Fanny Ipsmiller and Doctor Olson's wife went there and "made the poor soul decent," as Fanny put it. In a sorrowful rain a procession of a scant half dozen vehicles wound slowly out of the Hollow to the cemetery east of Sundower and when the last buggy had vanished over the ridge that marked the northern boundary of the Hollow, the sun came out and a gentle radiance lay over all that region. From that day, when Nate Brazell went about the country, men shunned him and women spoke of him without pity, fearfully.

Days flowed into twilights, gentle, indifferent, unperturbed, moving over Elsa like some long, gliding web of water, like a tide of dusk. Joe Tracy's letters became to her a demoralizing warmth. She feared his coming, and in the lonely meagerness of her days she longed for him, for the human substance of him, for his unruffled complacency. And in the next instant all her being cried out against his coming, against her physical, commonplace surrender to him, against her renunciation of the fine, sharp apprehensions that were hers in an inner solitude. The old fear of oblivion swept over her, the oblivion of the commonplace, the oblivion of Elder's Hollow—of all the Elder's Hollows of the world!

A few days before Thanksgiving, Elsa received a letter from Bayliss Carew, the first he had ever written to her. He would not be able to run home, as he had expected. His Aunt Hildreth was coming to the city to visit him over the holiday. But he would be home for Christmas if—*only* if she would write and tell him that she would see him when he came. Bayliss Carew had come to this, then, that he awaited her bidding before he stepped down into her world. The high-handed Carews, who reached out and took what they wanted wherever they found it! She did not write—she could not. There would be something of ignominy in that. Nor did she hear of Bayliss at Christmas, save for the book of verse he sent her, in which he had marked a little poem by James Stephens:

. . . my enemy,
That bitter heart and savage, said to me,
Some day, when this is past. . . .

When she had read the poem she closed the book and refused to look into it again.

It was during Christmas week that she received a note from Miss Hildreth Carew, asking her to come to see her on the following afternoon. "Just say you'll come and I'll send one of the men to fetch you. We have some things to talk over between us." Elsa went. There was the white house with its bright green roof, the terraced lawn, the fir hedge, and the two rows of elms, grown somewhat stouter now, their naked limbs trembling in the keen mid-winter air. There was the great brass knocker, too, shaped like a monk's head, that sent the echoes thundering through the house while she waited at the door . . . squeezing the box of woolen stockings under her arm. She could have laughed outright then, so vivid was the memory of it, but a brisk footfall sounded from within and the next moment she was facing Miss Hildreth. "Come in, come in, my dear. I'm waiting for you."

Elsa's curiosity had become almost unbearable by the time Miss Hildreth settled back in her chair and began talking, the little fires kindling quickly in her eyes. Elsa listened, as if she were dreaming in this dreamlike drawing-room with its open fire and its great complacent chairs, and Hildreth Carew sitting there, sipping her cup of tea, looking for all the world like a bit of old furniture herself, staid and enduring still. She had been asking about Reef, and how he liked his work now that he was a full-fledged young lawyer with a career before him, assisting old Tom Dewing, the attorney in Hurley. "And a very good connection, too. We've had dealings with Dewing. A good lawyer when he wants to be—and he ought to be able to start a young man on a career if anybody could. A little luck for a year or so is all your brother needs, I'm sure. He has it in him—Bayliss always said that. As for Bayliss—we'll never make a doctor out of him. He doesn't take to it, and when a boy doesn't take to a thing he's wasting time going on with it. But his father is to blame there."

For a moment she was silent, her sharp eyes measuring Elsa as they had done again and again over her cup of tea. Then she settled back into her chair and spoke out, sharply, abruptly.

"You know, of course, my dear, that Bayliss is in love with you." Her tone was not questioning, Miss Hildreth was stating a fact, simply, directly. Elsa felt there was no need for reply. "I have been looking at you," the

woman went on briskly, “and I must say that Bayliss is running true to form. He has the Carew eye. I never realized before just how—how pretty you have become. You have filled out well and your coloring is quite unusual. I should never have noticed that little blue vein on your right cheek, for example, if Bayliss hadn’t told me about it. It is decidedly attractive.”

The color flowed quickly over Elsa’s face.

“Don’t feel uncomfortable, my dear,” Miss Hildreth continued in her most impersonal manner. “I like to tell people what I think.” She paused and drew a deep breath. “You understand, of course—I want you to understand—that you and Bayliss Carew have been brought up in two very different worlds.”

Elsa made a feeble attempt to speak but Miss Hildreth lifted a hand quickly. “I think it will be much simpler if you let me say what I have to say. Two very different worlds, I was saying, with totally different ways of looking at things. Bayliss is trying to look at things just now as you look at them. He has sowed his wild oats—he thinks he’s tired of it—and he thinks he wants to settle down. What I want you to know, my dear, is that a Carew never settles down till he’s too old to get about by himself. The Carew women have always taken upon themselves the burden of saving the family from ruin when it seemed there was no hope for it. When things have become impossible, the women have taken hold and gone off to where the men could make another start in the world. Pretty creatures—many of them as pretty as you, my dear—have married Carew men in the past—and have found out what they were doing only when it was too late. I don’t want you to do that. I am telling you now—if you are thinking of Bayliss Carew you are thinking of a man who will demand all you have to give him and will insist on making a fool of himself wherever and whenever he has an opportunity. Telling you this will not save you from regrets, perhaps, but it will at least prepare you—and you will have no one to blame but yourself. In short, my dear, I am telling you that you would be very foolish to marry Bayliss, but if you do—I want you to marry him with your eyes open. That’s what I wanted to say to you, Elsa.”

The cool presumption of the woman had become almost too much for Elsa. She found it hard to control her voice when she finally protested, “But I have no thought of marrying Bayliss Carew, Miss Hildreth.”

Elsa chilled under Miss Hildreth’s smile. “I think—you will marry him, just the same,” she said.

Everything that Elsa had liked about her seemed to fall suddenly away from the woman and leave her ugly and hard, a scrawny ogre that lived in the fabulous house that had somehow escaped from between the covers of an old story book. Then, as suddenly, Elsa realized that Hildreth was only a Carew, after all, with the arrogant ways of a Carew, complete in her confidence that a Carew had only to make up his mind as to what he wanted and it was his. More of their high-handed assurance, Elsa thought to herself, waging a silent conflict with Miss Hildreth, who sat eyeing her from the depths of her chair. She wanted to speak out, to tell her that whatever the Carews might do in their world, she was secure within her own, to declare that she had hated them all from the first and would continue to hate them as long as there was a Carew left on earth. But her violence left her speechless. What, moreover, could one say to a woman like Hildreth Carew? It was like that when you went to visit the Carews. You heard what they had to say, felt your cheeks grow hot as you strove to make a reply, then remained silent and withdrew your feet under your chair.

Embarrassed beyond expression, Elsa found herself accepting another cup of tea from the hands of Miss Hildreth.

“And now, my dear, drink a little more tea before you go. I see I have made you very uncomfortable. Let’s talk no more about it.”

Elsa was willing enough to have Miss Hildreth talk of other things, of plans to enlarge the Carew house in the coming summer, of Bayliss’ brother Joel who was studying architecture at the university in Chicago, of Ada’s life at college and of Florence’s next trip to the city to buy clothes for the summer. Try as she might, however, Elsa could not free her mind of the sound of Miss Hildreth’s words: “I think—you will marry him, just the same.” One thought she put from her a dozen times that afternoon, the thought of Bayliss Carew’s life and her own, meeting and running together, like trails meeting—one out of the reedy waste of Elder’s Hollow, the other out of the rich, insolent fields of the Carews, meeting and running together under the wind, under the flowing of the seasons, the flowing of time.

CHAPTER X

Twilight flowered out over the prairie, a stealthy, phantasmal growth of wonder over this curve of earth held briefly in the curve of evening. In the north a sheaf of amethyst floated down to a shadowed horizon bed, sapphire and night-green, while a hedge of mist, budding impalpable rose and violet, obscured Elder's Hollow. The last burning seed of the sun had been dropped into the swamp of the meadow to the west, and in the idle water a flame grew. At the moment of dusk, remote and cool, like a frost-flower in the tranquil pastures of the sky, stood the evening star.

Joe Tracy had come home at last, nearly a week ago now, on an evening toward the end of June. Elsa's mother had urged him to stay with them for a week or so before going on to his place in South Dakota. "The old ranch has waited for you now for three years," she told him. "A few more days won't make any difference, surely." But Joe had needed little urging.

They sat, as usual after supper when the weather was warm, out on the back-stoop of the Bowers house—Elsa, Reef, Leon, Joe, and, lost beneath the shadows of the little bush that grew to the left of the stoop, Uncle Fred, squatting on his haunches, hugging his thin body and rocking slightly to and fro with a faint, tuneless humming. There had fallen an almost complete silence upon them all. On the first few nights of Joe's visit there had been so much of talk, so much of eager questioning and ready answering, so much recounting of Joe's experiences in France, that they had grown a little weary of it and were happy to sit in silence while the evening drew about them.

The lamp had not been lit indoors. Elsa could hear her mother at work in the kitchen, patting down a crock of butter, setting things to right in the semi-darkness, straining her eyes from long habit to save kerosene. Elsa thought of how the day always crept into houses and had its death there, with a hint of lonely squalor in its dying. The day never died out of doors—it vanished only, and you seemed to know, wholesomely, where. Twilight death in houses—it made you shudder a little to think of it.

The few sounds here were only the stillness made articulate: the muted bark of a dog, unreal and lonely over lonely distances; the cooing of Leon's doves in their cote on the barn roof, cozy, familiar, plaintive; the busy, dry chirp of the crickets in their little darkness; and over all the shrill singing of

the frogs, a sustained, eternal note of triumph and despair, out of the reverie of the earth.

Steve Bowers was out somewhere among the barns, although the evening chores were all done. Elsa had thought much about him during these days of early summer. He had no repose in him to sit and look upon the blue, encroaching tide of dusk. Life had overtaken him, passed him, and he was a man running; running, with dust in his eyes, trying to catch up with life. He was a haggard, hurrying man now, without rest in his spirit, without any quiet or any more real laughter in his eyes.

Leon sat on a milking stool, whittling a chip. He had something of his father's easy way, Elsa thought; the easy, laughing way that Steve Bowers had once had. He was twenty, nearly, and had not gone to the State agricultural college when Heck Lovey and Georgie Olson in Sundower had gone. But he was beginning to forget, *had* forgotten, probably, because he was born of this rough patch of land that winds had stripped and rains had washed to the core. For Leon, fortunately, there would never be this wistful dwelling upon the past, this painful seeking out of the future, this constant hunger of the mind for what is lost, for what may never be found.

Reef could not forget. Affairs were going better with him now, but gloomy doubts descended upon him still and he would sit, as tonight, fixed in silence. Elsa had heard him cry out in his sleep the night before, dreaming again that he was climbing in a high wind to thrust his hand into the whirling vanes of a windmill. But Elsa knew that Reef had set himself apart. You could set yourself apart if your soul hung in one of those white stars and was not buried in this wind-bitten earth.

The ember died out of the slough in the pasture to the west, and with the passing of its warmth the earth drew over itself a blue, diaphanous mantle. Stars opened, white and actual, projected and near out of the unthinkable profundity of darkness. From the northeast, hollowed and flattened by distance but full of a melancholy urgency, came the whistle of a passenger train approaching Hurley. Involuntarily, every one turned to look where far across the prairie the train was creeping like some fiery-linked insect.

“There she comes now,” Leon said aloud, “bringing Bay Carew home.”

Elsa was seized with a sudden restlessness, an impatience with everything about her, herself above all. She had known since the day before that Bayliss Carew was coming. Joel and his sister, Ada, had driven up from the Carew place in their new automobile and had told her the news. They were giving a barn dance tomorrow night, too, and wouldn't Elsa come

along and bring Leon? They would see Reef in town and ask him to bring Clarice Fletcher. There'd be lots of fun, especially with Bayliss home. Ada had smiled like a kitten.

Uncle Fred pulled himself up from the shadows beneath the lilac bush; with his angled limbs he might have been a great cricket enormously risen out of the darkness of the earth. Elsa watched him as he made his way down toward the barn. Halfway along the path he paused for a moment, his hands supporting his bent back, and looked up at the sky. Close beside his bowed, knotted figure black against the afterglow, stood the grotesque silhouette of an old plum tree inclining eastward as though it were about to take to crazy flight on its twisted, gesturing, almost leafless branches. Elsa stared. In that instant the tree and Uncle Fred were identical.

Along the road from Sundower, the muffled humming of its motor already audible, an automobile bore southward. Elsa's heart quickened with an unaccountable excitement. She felt that she could not sit another minute there in the intolerable silence that had fallen upon them, enveloping them. She was glad when Joe Tracy got up suddenly, stretching his arms above his head, and suggested a walk through the cottonwoods before going into the house. He picked up his guitar and plucked lightly at the strings, then moved away slowly into the shadows.

Elsa walked beside him, knowing the warm presence of his sturdy, rugged body, hearing his soft voice that was so full of a curious, indolent power that penetrated beyond her hearing, into her blood, into her untried, undiscovered senses:

“Out in Arizona where the bad men are,
Nothing there to guide you but an evening star. . . .”

The lights coming down the darkness of the road from Sundower were closer now. Elsa's heart beat hurriedly, as though to live quickly over a moment of insecurity—of distress.

“Roughest, toughest man by far
Is Rag-time Cowboy Joe.”

“That song was written about me,” Joe Tracy grinned. Elsa saw the white gleam of his strong teeth and the sudden sobering of his eyes. “Gee, Elsa, you don't know what it means to walk beside you like this. I've never met another girl in my life like you—nowhere.”

Elsa scarcely breathed, aware only of the swift whirling of her mind in its orbit, going over its familiar, agonizing course: “I want life. I want love. I have taught long enough in Elder’s Hollow!”

On both sides of the roadway were closely grown sumac and hazel bushes crowding darkly against the stars. Beyond the clearing ahead of them the earth stretched open to the horizon, velvety, blue-black, deep . . . deep. One of her earliest sensations had been that—her awareness of the earth’s depth. She pressed the sole of her shoe hard down in the soft dirt of the road and a sharp pang of consciousness swept through her. Deep earth of the flat prairie, deep earth of valleys and of hills—of the bare hills of South Dakota lying under the wind and the moon. And Joe Tracy there—and she with him—melting snow in the winter time to wash their children because of the alkali in the water. But she would have life there, she would have love there.

Joe swung his guitar suddenly to one side and halted, catching her about the shoulders. He stooped to look closely into her eyes. “Elsa—Elsa, I got to know. I love you—I dare to love you, see? Because you love me. I know. I feel it. We’ve been loving each other for four years. Now I’ve got to know. Tell me!”

She was close up against him now, against all the rugged strength of his body. She felt for a moment utterly dissolved, her fingertips fluent upon his cheek, her limbs fluent upon his limbs. It would be so easy now to tell him, “Yes—yes—I want you, Joe Tracy. I want your laughter—and your singing. I want your strength—and all the years that are left to you!” But the moment passed and she fled back into the hard central core of her being.

“Let me go, Joe, please!”

His arms fell away. She felt his dismay, his chagrin. He walked slowly forward, plucking at his guitar.

“Underneath . . . the stars . . .”

She was glad that he had no inkling of what was in her mind then. She knew now that she must not see Joe Tracy another day. If she saw him again as she had seen him just yesterday, the clear light of the fields on his crisp, sunburnt hair and on his strong brown throat—if she saw him again as she had seen him at noon that very day, standing out at the well as he lifted the tin dipper aloft in a salute to the heavens—she would have to tell him that she wanted him. She would go to the low hills of South Dakota with him, and they would have many children, and she would come at last to live in

her body entirely, in her mind not at all. Fear of him, fear of herself, ran brightly through her.

She spoke quickly, her voice cold and small. "Let's go in now, Joe. It's getting late."

They turned and she felt his arm placed snugly about her shoulders. This she did not resist. She seemed small and slight, even to herself. "You're like a snowdrop," he told her; and again, "You're like a little snowdrop, Elsa. You ought to have some one take care of you." She laughed dryly, her heart beating stifflingly under the simple tenderness of his manner.

It was only natural, she told herself lucidly, that she should feel as she did toward him. Your body twisted you this way and that, made you first a fretting, sprawling infant of which you had no memory; then a child who loved to drink cold water at the well, out of a white dipper with a rusted spot on the bottom like a brown penny; then a young girl, mortified and fierce at winters of poverty, with ice on the windowsill of your bedroom in a farmhouse on the prairie; then a woman grown, with life going, going. . . . She would have to feel toward some one as she felt now toward Joe Tracy. There was youth in her, and health in her, and it would betray her into a lifetime of bitter winters . . . carrying freezing pails of water across a threshold of eternity . . . gazing endlessly across gray, wind-swept hills that had no horizon.

"I must not talk with Joe again," she said to herself, over and over, until the phrase became a reverberation in her mind.

They passed out of the cottonwood grove, Elsa walking very straight, aware of him. As they reached the yard before the house, Joe cleared his throat significantly. "I'll wait another day, Elsa," he said softly. "After that—I must be gettin' along."

Another day! And he would be moving again in the fields, with the reality of the earth in his being, and the deep tenderness of it.

She hurried into the house.

It was the season for making hay. Early in the morning the men went to work in the meadows in the Hollow, all except Reef, who went back to his office in town.

All day Joe Tracy lived in Elsa's mind, the sturdy set of his shoulders, the sunburnt tint of his hair, the infectious zest of his laughter. She could

close her eyes and think of him holding her, cupping his hands about her face, searching beyond her eyes for something lonely that was there. It was pleasant to think of him thus, to go on building a structure of illusion on a small, uncertain shred of fact; a vast, domeless house of the spiritual on the mean, unsure foundation of the physical.

Elsa had an early supper ready for them when they came back in the evening. They would have to hurry if they were going to the barn-dance at the Carews'. She looked from the kitchen doorway as they came down the path from the barn—her father and Uncle Fred, Leon and Joe, hot and tired from their day in the hayfield. The horizon beyond the grove of cottonwoods was heavy, dust-colored. Perhaps there would be a storm, it was so hot—hot with the ponderousness of distant thunder. Leon and Joe paused at the well, each in turn pumping the cool water while the other washed.

“There’ll be rain tonight,” Steve Bowers said as he came into the kitchen.

Elsa hurried away to the inner room to help her mother put the supper on the table. When she came back to the kitchen Joe was standing in the doorway.

“Hello, Snowdrop!” he greeted her. “That’s sure been a hot one today.”

“It has been terrible,” Elsa replied, “but I think it will cool down a little before dark. It’ll be pretty warm for the dance if it doesn’t.”

Joe set one shoulder against the side of the doorway, crossed his legs and thrust his hands into his pockets. “I think I’ll take the night off and go up to Sundowner to see some of the boys, Elsa,” he said. “They’ll think it’s kind of funny I haven’t been up even to say hello.”

There was something about his attitude there in the doorway that affected Elsa strangely. “You mean you won’t go with us to the dance?”

“I’ve been thinkin’ it over,” he said. “I don’t owe that milk-fed outfit anything and I don’t feel like helpin’ them show off to the neighbors. Besides, I used to be their hired man. I wouldn’t feel right about it—and they wouldn’t. But that don’t need to bother you any. You go on down and have a good time. I’d ’a’ gone up to town before this only I didn’t want to spend time in town when I could spend it with you. I’ll just make good on it tonight while you’re at the dance. It’s my last chance this trip. I’ll be gettin’ along west tomorrow. I’ve got to. Anyhow, I guess I wouldn’t see much of you if I did go to the dance. And there ain’t anybody else I’d want to see—there’s a whole bunch I’d rather not see, at that. You go ahead, though. It

wouldn't be right for the teacher to stay away. I'll be waitin' for you when you get back. That bunch don't mean a thing to me anyhow."

He turned about in the doorway, spat vigorously into the yard, shifted his body and crossed his legs the other way. That gesture of spitting and shifting his body in the doorway—it was startlingly familiar. All at once Elsa knew why it had affected her so strangely. It was the ancient habit of Uncle Fred. Odd that she had never thought of it before.

From the inner room Elsa's mother called, "Come on, now!"

As they sat down to the table, the whistle of an express train going toward Hurley sounded through the open doorway. "That sounds pretty close tonight," Steve Bowers said. "There'll be rain before morning."

But Elsa scarcely heard what her father was saying. She was aware only that Joe and Uncle Fred had taken their watches from their pockets at exactly the same moment, then looked across the table at each other. They did not speak. There was no need of that. It was as if they had said, "She'll be on time." Joe Tracy—Uncle Fred!

After supper Elsa bathed and put on her best dress of pale green chiffon, a clinging thing with vague flowers in it, and fluffed out her hair so that the damp night air would curl it. When she was almost ready Leon called out to her that Reef was coming up the driveway with Clarice Fletcher. Joe had already gone off to Sundower, taking Uncle Fred with him for company. It was dusk when they drove away to the Carews', Elsa and Leon, Reef and Clarice Fletcher. Instead of the starred sky of last night, there gathered over the prairie a mood of heavy portent. Joe would be waiting for them when they got back, Elsa thought—not for *them*; for *her*. He must know what he was doing, promising to wait for her, persisting in her mind, leaving her no peace. "I must not talk with him again—I must not talk with him again!"

Through the treed approach to the Carew place lights were beginning to bloom. People were meeting in automobiles and buggies, hailing each other and passing up the driveway under the elms. As Reef drew to one side at the end of the lane the music of an orchestra drifted down to them from the barn loft. "That's the orchestra from Hurley," Leon said, helping Elsa get down. "They sure know how to make a splurge." They went toward the barn, were joined by people they knew, entered the great doorway hung with lanterns that swayed in the light breeze, then climbed the stairway to the enormous hayloft, an arched expanse that was now a milling confusion, bright with lights and gay with colors, strident, riotous, unrestrained.

Elsa felt herself seized suddenly and whirled into the stream of dancers. "Come on, little enemy, I've been waiting an hour for you!" She looked up into the laughing eyes of Bayliss Carew. "That makes a long wait for you, Bayliss Carew," she said. "I've been waiting for years," he told her then, and the laughter had gone from his eyes as he spoke.

As they moved into the heart of the dance, Elsa felt that people cleared a little space about them. The realization left her unexcited. She felt cool and firm, a single, shining entity against the Carews; against the slender, dark, supercilious Ada, standing there under the soft light of a Japanese lantern, bewildering the young farmers from beyond the Hollow with her condescending graciousness; against the smartly dressed, faintly amused Florence Breen; against the dry, inscrutable Hildreth and Michael's pale-skinned, languorous wife, who had been Nellie Block; against the plump, pigeon-like Mrs. Grace, Peter's wife; against all the insolent, handsome Carew men—the pompous old Seth and his sons, Michael and Joel. All of them were emphatically present; except Peter. Peter Carew, the only one Elsa would have been glad to see, had escaped, Elsa thought penetratingly, from this noisy spectacle of the family's good will. Hiding somewhere in the great house, perhaps, with a book on his knees, or riding out on the open prairie with the storm-clouds gathering about him. Not here, at any rate, to look on while the district paid homage to the Carews. The Carews, she thought passionately, forever the Carews, like dark gods dimming the prairie sun!

Dancing with Bayliss exhilarated her; there was a pleasant physical sense of rightness in their dancing together which was unaffected by her old feeling of animosity toward him. For the moment, indeed, she was unaware of the feeling. She felt strangely sure of herself, unabashed. She even laughed when Bayliss, smiling down at her, said, "At least we don't fight over this." He held her for an instant a little closer. Her cheeks warmed faintly. She impudently examined his face above her. It was not his face in particular, but the face of all the Carews, mirror reflecting mirror, dimming and slurring over the hard contours, creating an image impenetrable, debonair. The face of a Carew it was, surely, not as arrestingly handsome as that of Michael or the younger Joel, perhaps, but a Carew none the less. His eyes are not blue, she thought to herself, they are like moss under ice.

When the music had ceased he led her toward the loft door. "Let's sit on the floor over there where we can get a little air," he suggested. "I want to talk to you for a minute."

They seated themselves free of the jostling crowd and Bayliss turned to her with a frown. "I've given up medicine," he told her abruptly. "You'll think less of me now than ever, but I can't help that. I found I couldn't stick it." He cleared his throat, then turned his head toward her with a nervous jerk and she saw that his look was bleak, distraught. "I thought I could make a go of it. But something must have happened to me in the war. I got life there in a raw lump. I'm sick of flesh—human flesh. I can't bear the sight of it any longer." His voice was harsh and low now. She felt a hot pricking at her eyelids and in her throat. "I had it out with Dad first thing this morning. It was a terrible row. But a man has a right to be what he wants to be—even if it's just nothing. I told him I'd stay here and work my part of the land. Michael has been working my share for me. So—" he tossed one hand out ironically, "—it seems that I'm going to be a farmer, after all."

Some one was approaching behind them, calling Elsa by name. It was Lily Fletcher and Joel Carew. Lily's eyes were over-bright above her flushed cheeks. "Hello, Else! What are you two hiding away from every one for? I want to dance with Bay." Bayliss jumped to his feet and gave his hand to Elsa. "I'm coming for you again, remember," he told her quickly, his voice very low and intimate. "I'm not half through yet." The next moment he was out on the floor with Lily and Elsa was left with Joel. "You can't very well get out of it," Joel smiled, offering his arm.

Elsa went with him into the crowd, abstractedly. The dancers, the colored lanterns, the clamor of voices that rose with the music, the Carew women standing graciously aloof on the outskirts of the vivacious company, the familiar faces coming close to her and then whirling away, all was a blurred pattern before Elsa's eyes. Against this dizzy panorama she was a single bright flame of consciousness. Vivid fragments of memories swept in, fusing in that flame. Miss Hildreth, smiling from the depths of her chair—"You will marry him, just the same!" Joe Tracy, standing in the doorway—"I'll be waiting for you." Her own fear, beating upon her heart—"I must not talk with him again—I must not talk with him again!" Pride, hatred, hunger from dark depths threatening her destruction, her betrayal. And now Bayliss Carew—"A man has a right to be what he wants to be!" A man's right—a woman's right—*her* right—the right of Elsa Bowers to turn from Elder's Hollow, from all the Elder's Hollows of the world. Something was mounting darkly within her, something ominous . . . a sense of tremendous movement existing somewhere unseen, tremendous clamors removed beyond the range of hearing.

She was with Bayliss again, hearing his voice as from a distance, moving beside him through the crowd, down the dim stairway, out into the cool air with lightning playing along the horizon and making stark ghosts of the trees. “Over here, Elsa, away from the noise.” Presently she was seated beside him on the edge of the duck pond, the water a black disk before them, tall cottonwoods stirring and whispering behind. And Bayliss Carew’s voice, close to her now, soft and urgent.

“There’s no use, Elsa,” he was saying, “I can’t see a glimmer of hope without you. Damn it, it’s futile without you! There’s something lonely and—and sort of wild in the Carew blood, Elsa. We’ve been looked on as blackguards, when the truth is we’ve only been seeking escape from something. No woman has ever understood a Carew man. You haven’t. Some have, perhaps, but they weren’t the kind a man marries. Besides, I’m not asking you to understand me.”

“What *are* you asking of me, Bayliss?” she inquired tremulously.

“Good God, what a question!” He leaped up impetuously and stood above her, his hands thrust down into his pockets. After a long time he faced her abruptly. “I’m asking you to marry me, Elsa Bowers,” he broke out roughly.

Her breath caught quickly, fingers lacing tensely together.

“I know how you have hated me,” he hurried on, “how you *think* you hated me. I’m not asking you to love me—just now. I want to have you with me—where I can see you—where I can teach you to get over hating me, if that’s possible. But I’ve got to own you—somehow or other. I can wait till you’re ready to love me.”

She fought to preserve clearly within herself her old estimate of him, her old animosity, her precious resentment. She rose trembling to her feet, and for a long moment she stared intently at him through the darkness. For an instant she saw Bayliss radiant and solitary, wistful and apart from the Carews, apart from everything familiar to her. A voice of pity for him cried out from the back of her mind, “You don’t know what you’re asking, Bayliss Carew! You don’t know what you’re doing when you marry me!” She felt him move toward her and take her tightly clasped hands in his own.

“Do you understand me, Elsa?” he asked unsteadily. “Will you marry me—like that—and wait for love?”

It seemed to her then that some power outside herself shaped her words. “If you really want it to be that way, Bayliss,” she murmured, scarcely

breathing. “If you really want it. . . .” She knew now that fear shaped her words. A dismal fear of gray hills and barren years—oblivion.

She saw that he was at first incredulous. Presently he stood back from her, smiling at her in a nervous, quizzical way, running his fingers through his hair. “You mean it—you’ll marry me?” he asked.

“If you really want it to be that way,” she told him. He took her by the arm suddenly and led her along the margin of the pond and out upon the driveway where they came upon the roadster which Joel had driven to town the day before.

“Sit in there and wait for me,” he said quickly. “I can’t take you back into that crowd again tonight. I want to talk to Reef for a minute.”

A sense of complete loneliness came upon her while she waited for him and thought of him and what she had done. Tears came into her eyes—Joe Tracy would be waiting for her. She would have to go to him now and tell him. She knew, instinctively, that it would not be so hard for him to hear it as it would be for her to tell it. In Joe Tracy was no fundamental desolation, no abysmal darkness. He lived healthily, insouciant as the earth. He would sing himself into another heart, find solace in another love.

Bayliss was beside her now, putting the car into the open road. “We’re going to the city, Elsa,” he told her with something of his old indolent humor. “If we waited another day you might change your mind. I’ve told Reef all about it—we have his blessing.” She did not protest. Her eyes were upon the road before them, her senses drugged by the hot fragrance of wayside grass and the dizzying, ceaseless sound of insects very near and strangely stirring. She had a sense of drifting into something inevitable, inescapable.

A peal of nearer thunder broke above the motor’s throbbing. Bayliss glanced at her and said, “You’re trembling. If you were in love with me I’d put my arm around you.”

She turned and looked at him, and surprised there the boy of fourteen or so, white and sick, his black brows drawn together. She felt, apprehensively, that if she had looked she would have seen that he held in his hand a green frog, rejected.

CHAPTER XI

While they were still more than a mile away, Elsa could see that the Carew house was lighted in nearly every window. The entire family, then, was at home. When they had come nearer, she experienced an imponderable moment of dread that ran through her body like a dark shadow. Instinctively she felt that those lights, rising up out of the deep warm darkness, were not meant as a welcome to her and Bayliss. When they drove up the graveled approach to the garage, Bayliss patted her hands reassuringly where they lay tightly clasped in her lap.

“Don’t be nervous, now,” he said gently. “Gosh, I feel your trembling all up and down my own back. You’re not going to be afraid of the family, are you? We won’t stay with them any longer than we can help, anyhow. They’ll be snooping around—asking questions. I have a little vanity.”

“But I’m not afraid of them,” she protested, a little warmly. “I know pretty well what to expect. I’ll be prepared for it, whatever it is.”

Glancing sideways at him, she saw his wry smile. It was evident that he also knew, and had been preparing himself, too, for this moment. There would be no glad welcome awaiting them at the hands of the Carews. Bayliss had spoken of it before and had made light of it with characteristic nonchalance. He had said enough, however, to convince her that he was not nearly so light-hearted over his homecoming as he would have her believe. Elsa, on the other hand, was guilty of an almost perverse eagerness to walk in upon the Carew women and have it over with. She hoped they would all be there, even the august, hearty, gray-haired old Seth Carew himself. “Sow your wild oats where you will,” he had once said in the hearing of some of the young men of Sundower, “but don’t bring the crop home!” It had become an oft-repeated precept and Elsa remembered it now with flaming scorn.

Bayliss was closing the door of the garage when Elsa saw one of the farmhands approaching through the darkness. The man seemed awkward, ill at ease. He cleared his throat and removed his hat, then hurried into speech before Bayliss had an opportunity to greet him.

“I thought—might be you didn’t know about it,” he stammered, “you away travelin’ an’ all. I thought I’d come an’ tell you—before you go in.

You ain't heard, I guess."

Elsa glanced apprehensively at Bayliss.

"I've heard nothing," he said anxiously. "What is it, Ben?"

"Well—" Ben hesitated. "I've been feeling mighty sorry for her all evenin'—Miss Hildreth, I mean—she's been runnin' out an' lookin' down the road all evenin'—to see if you wasn't comin'."

"What's the matter, Ben?" Bayliss demanded sharply.

"Peter—Peter Carew is dead."

Ben seemed to vanish into the night. Elsa found herself walking to the house beside Bayliss, who appeared very straight and altogether taller than she had known him. He had not uttered a word. He had merely turned away from the hired man and had gone toward the house, like a tree moving. Elsa herself had no sense of reality, no sense of contact even with the ground on which she trod. That terrible sentence hung in her mind, repeated itself over and over until it became a senseless clamor. Peter Carew is dead. Peter Carew is dead. But no—that could not be! Peter Carew was vast and magnificent, and laughed like some centaur down out of the dim and glorious ages—and rode a chestnut horse sheer into the mystic sky of summer. Peter Carew could not die!

They entered the hall and passed the wide staircase, and the closed parlor door. On the other side of the hall the door to the library stood open. Elsa glanced quickly into the room and saw Hildreth Carew standing there, tall and still, her thin hand lifted, beckoning them. Elsa moved blindly toward that stiff figure in black, theatrically stark against the soft radiance of the room. Bayliss led her across the threshold and Hildreth motioned them into chairs.

"Ben told me," Bayliss said unsteadily, regarding Hildreth with strained eyes. "What happened?"

As Elsa watched her it seemed out of reason that that strange black figure could bend and seat itself before them. The thin hands were outstretched on the arms of the chair, the long fingers so still that they might have been carved from marble. The black, enigmatic eyes, more lustrous than Elsa had ever seen them, looked into the shadows beyond Bayliss, unmoving. The rich glow from the floor lamp, reflecting on the squarish bridge of Hildreth's nose, heightened the illusion that here was no human being, sensuous and breathing, but some antique painting, at once warm and austere.

“His horse brought him home—last night. He was riding Baal, that new colt of his.” Her voice seemed to Elsa but a distant echo of itself. “He regained consciousness and lived long enough to tell me what had happened.” Her glance shifted quickly to Elsa, then back to Bayliss. “You are married, I take it?” Bayliss nodded his head and Hildreth went on. “Then your wife will share the truth with the rest of us. She is now a Carew.”

Elsa heard the pronouncement as if it had been the passing of a sentence.

“Peter was south of Hurley, of course,” Hildreth went on. “It seems there was another of those drunken festivals there. Our Michael went down later with Chet Bloom. He says Peter had been drinking a good deal. There is a man there by the name of Krajek, I think, who has a sister. He found the girl and Peter in a room. There was a quarrel and Krajek followed Peter outside. Peter was getting into the saddle when Krajek threatened him. He stepped down and knocked Krajek to the ground.”

At this point in her story Hildreth drew a deep breath and Elsa thought her eyes brightened with an unearthly shine. Could it be that Hildreth Carew, in the depths of her mysterious soul, was thrilling to this tragic narrative of Peter?

“He was getting back into the saddle again when Krajek struck him with something he had picked up from the ground. Peter said there had been an iron wedge lying there when he had tied the colt to the end of a log before going in. He thought it must have been that. The thing struck him in the back of the head. He said he remembered throwing his arms about Baal’s neck—and that Baal bolted through the gate. He must have held on just by instinct. You remember he used to say, Bayliss, that even after he was dead he could ride any horse they set his body on. We sent for Doctor Kennedy—Olson knows too much about us—and told him Peter had fallen from his horse. Kennedy did what he could, but it was no use. The last thing Peter said was that he didn’t want Krajek punished—Krajek had a pretty wife, he said. Besides, the family would suffer from the revelations that would be sure to follow—and Peter thought much of the family name—he was very proud.”

“The others know?” Bayliss asked.

“They had to know. But none outside the family, of course,” she added, looking once more at Elsa. “He told me to tell you that he was sorry he could not last to welcome you and your bride home. I think I ought to tell you that he approved of your choice and—I may as well say it now as later—he left you a third of his land.”

Her eyes gleamed with a deep inner light as she got to her feet and turned to Elsa. "Come, my child," she said, "you must be tired. This is a very trying homecoming for you. Come with me to my room and rest—Bayliss will have to see the others."

Her voice was very gentle, with an infinite weariness in it, Elsa felt, and yet her eyes continued to shine with that vivid intensity that had been there throughout the telling of her story. Elsa could not help feeling that there was something perversely satisfying to Miss Hildreth in the part she was playing in this strange drama.

Elsa got up and followed her as though through an appalling dream. She heard low voices here and there through the house and realized that each branch of the family was keeping to itself in its grief for Peter. As they ascended the stairway, Elsa looked back and saw Bayliss still sitting in the library. He had not moved since she had left him. She saw the bowed breadth of his shoulders and the well-formed outline of his head. Her heart caught at a resemblance she had not observed before. With a fearful excitement, she seemed to see the glamour of Peter Carew settling down upon Bayliss, enveloping him, molding him in a dark radiance. It was a frightening illusion.

In Hildreth's room Elsa removed her clothes and slipped into a dressing gown which Hildreth gave her. She had bought some things in the city but they were in Bayliss' bag downstairs. Hildreth stepped out of the room for a short while and returned to tell her that a warm bath was being drawn for her. "The bathroom is just down the hall there. And the girl will be up with tea by the time you are out."

Hildreth sat down in a low chair and began rocking slowly, her arms folded across her flat breast, her eyes closed. Elsa's throat tightened suffocatingly. Her eyelids closed down on stinging tears. Peter Carew—dead! Peter Carew—riding a chestnut horse across the prairie on a day blown full of light. . . . "Look out there, little girl, you'll get your feet wet!" She could not stand thinking of it. She hurried from the room and down the hall, guided by the sound of water running for her bath. Subdued voices came from the hall below. Bayliss was talking now. His sisters would be there, and his brothers—all the Carews toward whom she had been defiant, hostilely defensive on her journey home. She found herself utterly unable to take account of them now, to feel any emotion toward them, either of timidity or of defiance. Peter Carew was dead—the living Carews were but shadows. She stepped into the bathroom and closed the door behind her.

Hildreth was pouring the tea when she returned to the room. “Sit down there, my dear, and drink some tea. It’ll help you now, after your bath.”

Elsa took the tea and seated herself on Hildreth’s sofa. Hildreth sat down in her low rocking-chair and began to talk in a tone that was wholly without emotion. “This house will not be fit for you to live in now. You must lose no time in building a place of your own if you are to have any happiness at all.”

“We intend to,” Elsa said, striving to keep her Voice level. “As soon as possible.”

Hildreth’s reply came back quickly. “Don’t misunderstand me. I am not trying to make things any harder for you. If Peter had lived things might have been very different. He was as devoted to Bayliss as though he was his own son. I believe Peter’s wife almost thinks he is her son. When a woman like Grace becomes jealous of a man—even if the man is her own nephew and more like a son to her than anything else—when a woman like Grace becomes jealous, there’s no living where she is. Grace is going to make it unpleasant for you, my dear. She resents you—she’ll resent you more yet. She prides herself upon being gently outspoken—*gently* outspoken. The Carew women, I may say, have never got along together any better than they might.”

In her heart Elsa cried out that she was not a Carew woman—that she was herself, Elsa Bowers, with no place in their petty affairs—but all she could do was to sit and drink her tea, holding her cup so that it would not tremble against her saucer, and assure Miss Hildreth that she and Bayliss would not be long in the big house.

There was a light tap at the door and Bayliss entered with Michael and Joel, who came at once and seated themselves on the sofa beside Elsa.

Michael spoke. “The girls are too worn out to talk tonight, Elsa,” he said quietly, “but I think I can speak for all of us. We think Bayliss has had a great bit of luck in winning you. It’s—it’s impossible for us to do the right thing by the two of you just now—after what has happened. But you will understand that, of course. It’s been an awful blow to us all, and the girls are taking it pretty hard, especially Aunt Grace.”

The haggard lines of his face startled Elsa. The younger Joel sat staring at the carpet.

“I do understand, of course,” she murmured. “It’s a terrible thing. . . .” How could she tell them what a terrible thing it was to her? She could not explain to them that Peter Carew was more to her than just a man—a kind of

god, rather. It would sound absurd to them. She repeated, "It's a terrible thing!" and after a long silence Michael and Joel got up and went out with a softly murmured "good night" as they closed the door.

Hildreth sat rocking to and fro, her hands folded in her cashmere shawl. "Now—you two run along and get some sleep. It's late and the funeral tomorrow will be trying enough, with everybody staring and wondering, the way they do. I suppose they told you, Bayliss, that it's going to be in the church. Grace insists it will look more respectable—and give people less to talk about." She made a low, bitter sound in her throat, a ghost of a laugh, a sound that frightened Elsa with its hint of a tragedy older and sadder, even, than this one that had just befallen the house.

Elsa got to her feet and Hildreth rose and put her arm about her shoulder. "You will be going down to see your people tomorrow morning, of course. You'd better bring back some dark clothes, if you have any." Elsa nodded. "Good night, my dear. Good night, Bayliss."

Then Bayliss had his hand on Elsa's arm and was leading her down the softly carpeted hall, leading her through the dark crystalline spell of the Carew house to his rooms at the other end of the corridor.

"Go in and sit down," he told her, opening the door and stepping back. "I'll fetch the bag with your things."

He was gone and she was alone, looking about her and struggling with the impulse to turn and run from this place in which she had suddenly become an impostor. She stared unseeingly at the half dozen good etchings on the walls; at an ancient Chinese brass casket that stood on a table; at the rich, soft rug, which some still clear bit of her mind compared to sunlight through blood; at his books lining the room in their modest low shelves; at all that belonged to the gentler, the more intimate side of Bayliss Carew. These knew him as she could not know him; his vanity, his fears, his tenderness, his pride. She stood rebuked before him, burdened with an intolerable sense of her own guilt. Was it this, then, that she had married—this instead of a shack and children and the smell of sheep and the rolling, empty world of South Dakota? Had she been as unscrupulous, as unjust as any Carew? Her cheeks, her throat, the palms of her hands were burning.

Bayliss entered, closed the door behind him, and crossed the room to another door which stood half open, revealing a smaller room with a bed in it.

“You can have absolute privacy in here,” he said, waving his hand toward the bedroom. “There’s a door, there, that leads to the hall. I’ll make myself comfortable on the couch there—it won’t be the first time. I’ll move a few things out so as not to disturb you in the morning.”

She went with him into the bedroom and took her things out of the bag while Bayliss gathered some articles of his own and carried them to the outer room. When she was alone again she felt once more that sense of piercing, incomprehensible reproach. She turned and saw Bayliss where he had thrown himself into a chair in the other room, his back turned halfway toward her, his head bent down upon one of his hands. Once more, too, she experienced that vivid, that complete illusion—the head and shoulders there against the back of the chair were the head and shoulders of Peter Carew, reproaching her now.

She moved nervously into the doorway and stood looking down at Bayliss. When he did not look up, she stepped softly into the room and seated herself on the littered couch near his chair. “Bayliss—talk—to me—just a little, please,” she pleaded.

He lifted his head and smiled wanly. “What’s the matter, Elsa?” he asked. “You are not frightened, are you?”

“No—not that. I just wasn’t prepared for this, that’s all.”

“None of us were, if it comes to that,” he replied promptly.

“I had expected something very different,” she went on, “and I was prepared for that. I could have stood their hating me, but——”

“You’ll probably get enough of that, too, if you want it,” he told her, smiling.

“But I don’t care about that now. Peter’s dying has made me feel so small, so unworthy. I loved Peter Carew, Bayliss—I’ve loved him ever since the first time I saw him—one day when I was wading in the ditch. I’ll always love him—no matter what they say about him—no matter how he came to die. I want you to know that I understand a little how you must feel, and I’m sorry—sorry I can’t help you bear it.”

“But you are helping me, Elsa,” he said warmly. “The fact of your being here at all——”

“Bayliss,” she interrupted him, “I did wrong—I did wrong when I married you. If I hadn’t married you, I might at least have been your friend through this.”

He made an inarticulate sound then, got up from his chair, and walked to the fireplace where he stood leaning his elbows on the mantelpiece and looking down at her. “You seem to forget, Elsa, that you didn’t marry me—I married *you*. I made a bargain and I’m trying to live up to the terms of it as well as possible under the circumstances. We hadn’t counted on anything like this happening. But it has happened—and we’ll just try to make the best of it. I don’t want a misfortune of this kind to have any bearing on your attitude to me. This will all pass. Peter will be buried tomorrow and the world will have to go on without him. I’ll go on loving you—and waiting for you. You’ll go on stubbornly thinking that you hate me. In the end, the death of Peter Carew will have very little to do with your happiness or mine.”

He took a pipe from the mantel behind him and knocked it sharply against the palm of his hand. Elsa felt her own helplessness before the cool arrogance of his reasoning. She knew Peter’s death had touched him as perhaps nothing had ever touched him before. She knew the pain he was suffering, his tortured face betrayed him. She had come to him out of sympathy, offering her understanding because of a mutual sorrow in the presence of which everything else became petty by comparison. She might have gone on—*would* have gone on—seeking some way to let him know that she had married him because she had been in love with some one else and her love had made her afraid. She wanted to tell him that that love had suddenly died out of her life, leaving no trace of light or shadow on her heart, that it had been no more than a mirage, a cloud over the eyes of youth. But he had drawn away, behind his pride, reminding her that the death of Peter Carew was little more than an unhappy incident in their lives. Pride was Bayliss Carew’s master.

She got up from the couch and moved slowly away toward the inner room. In the doorway she paused and looked back at him. He was standing with one elbow on the mantelpiece behind him, his empty pipe in his mouth, his fingers thoughtfully caressing the bowl.

“I came to tell you how sorry I was, Bayliss,” she said softly. “I didn’t mean——”

“Of course, Elsa,” he said quickly, setting his pipe aside and coming toward her. “I’ve been a little brutal, I guess. I didn’t mean to be. It *does* help to know how you feel about it all. Peter was the best friend I ever had. Only,” he stooped and took her hands in his—“I guess I’m a bit lonely because of the loss—and it makes it so much harder to wait for—for the only thing that can ever take its place.” He stopped suddenly and touched his

lips to her hair. “Run along now, little enemy, and get some sleep. It’s going to be a hard day for you tomorrow.”

Her heart quickened as she bade him good night and crossed her threshold into her room. Then, with a frown, she quietly closed the door behind her.

CHAPTER XII

While she dressed the next morning, the room was painted with a delicate early pink and gold from the sweet outer world of summer. She felt refreshed and vital in the beauty of the day and the misgivings of the night before were almost forgotten. Even some of her unhappiness in Peter Carew's death had passed; it seemed to her now that her gallant and careening spirit had gained a release from an unnatural abode. She heard Bayliss moving about in the next room and a queer eagerness to see him, merely to set eyes on him, came over her.

At her light tap he opened his door and smiled down at her. Elsa felt a deep flush spread over her cheeks and was annoyed. She noticed that he looked worn, as though he had not slept, and her flush deepened with self-reproach.

"I'm ready to go down when you are," she told him.

"Any time," he said, his voice curiously patient, curiously without color or feeling of any kind.

She walked a little before him, along the hall and down the broad stairs. It seemed to her now that an age had passed since she had come up those stairs with Hildreth the night before. The women of the family, all except Florence Breen, were assembled in the library. Bayliss took Elsa's arm as they moved into the softly lighted room. Tardily, without any visible reaction toward her, the four women seated within looked up. Their faces were set, tear-stained, and their smiles as they looked at her were only a slight lifting of the corners of their lips. With the exception of Hildreth, they might have been looking upon Elsa for the first time in their lives. They glanced past her, then toward Bayliss, waiting apparently for him to speak. Elsa felt his touch on her shoulder, so light that she barely knew he had put his arm about her. And then his voice—"Girls, here is Elsa, my wife."

They were, Elsa thought with an inward shiver, like a room full of mechanical toys. Even their grief seemed held under some long-employed, automatic control. She felt the acid of their resentment pouring out toward her—felt herself hardening to a serene, clear substance against it. She continued to smile at them with a gentleness which was not altogether assumed; they were pitiful, in their sorrow and in their ludicrous self-

esteem. Simultaneously, as though the scene had been rehearsed, the four women got up and moved across the floor. It seemed to Elsa that the four corners of the room with their rich furbishments were drawing inward, together, and moving toward her.

It was Hildreth who spoke first. "Good morning, my dear," she said, touching her arm. "I hope you slept well. We'll have a bite of breakfast in a little while. Even at times like these—" She sighed and did not finish her sentence, moving away to Bayliss so that the others might come forward and speak with Elsa.

Ada and Michael's wife, Nellie, each kissed her primly and perfunctorily on the cheek, glancing first at Bayliss, Elsa observed, to see that their welcome to her was not lost upon him. Each murmured essentially the same thing. . . . This was a sad homecoming for her and Bayliss. . . . They hoped she would understand. . . . They welcomed her and hoped she would try to feel at home with them in spite of their misfortune. . . .

Grace Carew, Peter's widow, was apparently unequal to the task of welcoming her. She turned back to her chair with a smothered sob and buried her face in her handkerchief. Then all the others moved back to their chairs, like the pieces of a picture puzzle painted on glass, moving and fitting precisely back into their places.

"Haven't the boys come down yet?" Bayliss asked.

"They drove to town early," Hildreth told him. "There were some things to attend to before—this afternoon. We're waiting for your father."

Even as she spoke, there came the sound of a footfall approaching the doorway and Elsa turned to see Seth Carew coming along the hall. It seemed to her that he must have grown years older since she had last seen him, on the night of the barn dance, standing pompously to one side as he watched the whirling mob of dancers under the light from the colored lanterns. He looked smaller and almost feeble as he paused in the doorway, brushing his gray hair back with one hand, looking from one to another of those in the room. Irrelevantly, that oft-repeated precept of Seth Carew's came into Elsa's mind just then. "Sow your wild oats where you will, but don't bring the crop home!" What was she, after all—Elsa Bowers, of Elder's Hollow? She had met the Carew women defiantly. Her spirit failed her in the presence of Seth Carew, a man grown suddenly old because of the tragedy that had overtaken him. She felt his gaze upon her, then saw him draw his shoulders back a little as he came toward her, his hand outstretched.

“The little teacher—from the Hollow,” he said, taking her hand. “Well—you’ve got your hands full now.” He smiled faintly as he spoke, then sobered quickly. “I hope this—this misfortune of ours brings you no ill luck.”

Elsa saw Hildreth start abruptly from her place and come quickly toward them, a strained, almost frightened look in her eyes. “Let us have breakfast, Seth,” she said hastily, taking his arm. But the old man shook her off stubbornly and turned to Bayliss. “I was in bed when you came last night,” he said. “It wouldn’t have hurt you to come in and see me.”

“They told me you were sleeping,” Bayliss said. “I thought it would be better to let you rest.”

“Most of your thinking lately, Bay, seems to have gone pretty much at loose ends,” the old man said stoutly. “We’ll not quarrel about it, though. It’s no day, this, for words.” He turned to Hildreth. “Let’s go in to breakfast.”

It seemed to Elsa that she would never recover wholly from the memory of that first breakfast in the presence of the Carews. Seated beside Bayliss, an hour later, on her way to pay a hurried visit to her father and mother, she could not clear her mind of the picture. Ada Carew, frankly supercilious and quite unaware, apparently, of the feeling of loss that weighed so heavily upon the others at the table; Nellie, Michael’s wife, openly contemptuous of Elsa, softly solicitous toward Seth Carew and to Peter’s wife; Grace, inconsolable, making much of her grief; Hildreth, a little impatient with them all, except Elsa herself, toward whom she was unnecessarily attentive; and old Seth, dwelling with his own dark thoughts, stricken and sad. Elsa was grateful for the fields and the clouds and the cool, fresh breeze on her cheeks.

Bayliss had been silent since leaving the house. When they were well along the open road he broke out suddenly: “I can’t help feeling glad for Peter, Elsa. Peter wasn’t happy—he was running away from himself—always. Above all, he was running away from the long-suffering and the self-sacrifice—and the thing that women call patience. First, his mother—my grandmother. I’ve heard enough about her. Hildreth gloats over her in that vicious way of hers. Then his wife, Grace, and Hildreth herself, although she won’t admit it. I’ll bet that Peter wished to God—often—that he could find a woman who wouldn’t tolerate him. He would have worshipped her.”

Elsa glanced at him swiftly. His eyes were dark and intent on the road ahead. She made no reply. She was wondering whether there might not be

some gentle reproach hidden beneath his words. Presently she took off her hat and pushed the clinging hair from her brow. Bayliss glanced at her and smiled ruefully. "You know damned well how pretty you are when you do that," he observed. She stirred uneasily under her own thoughts.

Elsa's father and mother were standing together in the doorway when Bayliss drove the car in from the road. Leon had seen them coming, too, and was running down the pathway from the barn. Elsa jumped to the ground at once and hurried to meet her father, who had come out into the yard as the car drew to a stop. Her mother stood in the doorway, her hands folded in her apron, and Elsa knew that she was weeping.

"Go and talk to Bayliss, Pa," she said quickly, "while I run in and see Ma."

She threw her arms about her mother, kissed her, and drew her gently into the house. "I couldn't believe it—I couldn't believe it!" her mother said over and over again, seating herself and rocking to and fro with her hands still folded in her apron. "I didn't think I'd ever see the time——"

"Now don't go on like that, Ma," Elsa interrupted. "They're coming in. Here, straighten yourself up a bit."

In a moment the men's voices were at the door and Steve Bowers came in followed by Bayliss and Leon. Bayliss came forward and offered his hand to Mrs. Bowers. "I tried to square it with Mr. Bowers," he said, smiling a little self-consciously, Elsa thought, "but he told me I'd have to come to you about it."

She got up and shook hands with him soberly, remembering Peter, Elsa felt, even in this moment. "I think you might 'a' let us know about it," she complained.

"I'd never have got her at all, if I'd waited for that," he replied.

"Well—I s'pose I'll get used to it. I s'pose I'll have to. An' your poor uncle!"

"Yes—we're pretty badly broken up over that," Bayliss replied quickly. "I think I'll leave Elsa with you for a while. I have some things to attend to in Sundower. I'll be back again, right away."

Elsa knew that he was leaving so that she might be alone with her family for a while. They stood and watched him go, then Elsa's mother remembered to shoo the flies away from the screen door with her apron and remarked that it was a very hot day for a funeral.

“I’ll have only a few minutes,” Elsa reminded them when they were all seated in the kitchen. “I want to get something to wear to the church this afternoon.”

She glanced from one to another of them and saw that they all bore expressions of varying degrees of self-consciousness. She knew at that instant, moreover, that she was no longer one of them. Warm as was her own feeling for them, there had come a change in their thought of her—she had become a Carew. The knowledge at first caused her a faint bridling of anger, but reason told her that there was nothing to do but accept their attitude. They would never understand, would never even believe the truth about her, even if she should dream of telling them. She experienced an acute loneliness, a realization that she belonged nowhere, neither here nor with the people among whom she must, for a time at least, move and have her being.

“I wish Reef could have been here,” she said, more to herself than to any one within hearing.

“You could ’a’ knocked me over with a feather when he come home and told us,” her mother said then, with an accompanying sigh of resignation and chiding. “And all of us thinkin’ all along that you had other *i-dees*.” She took out one of her side combs and swept up a limp graying strand of hair, tucking the comb snugly back into place. Then she sighed again and added, in a tone that carried little conviction, “But I s’pose it’s all for the best. You’ll have a roof over your head, anyhow.”

“Joe left for S. D. the day after the Carew dance,” Leon said, looking out of the window as he spoke.

A closed look had come upon the faces of them all, Elsa observed. They were generously not reproaching her in words, she thought bitterly. But they were, each one of them, secretly thinking that she had deserted her own kind, that she had betrayed the very nature from which she had sprung.

“I knew he was anxious to get away,” Elsa said absently.

“I’ve been thinking a thing or two while you’ve been gone,” Steve Bowers said with the heavy air he always took on when he was about to say something which touched him emotionally. As he spoke, Uncle Fred came in quietly and seated himself without a word. “I haven’t got much to offer you in the way of a wedding present,” he went on, “but I’ve always wanted to do something for my own. The Lord knows, I haven’t done much! But I’ve been thinking you and Bayliss would be building a place of your own, mebbe—that house down there won’t hold any more women than it’s got

already. Anyhow, you couldn't get a better place to build on—you couldn't find a better spot than the top o' the Mountain, there—a little to leeward, of course. Mebbe you won't think much of it—and mebbe *he* won't think much of it—but the Mountain's yours. Your own."

"Oh, Pa!" Elsa cried, unable to say more for a moment. The Mountain! The very heart and soul of Steve Bowers! "Oh, no! You mustn't do that! Bayliss doesn't need more land, goodness knows—and what will you have left? No—I can't let you."

Steve Bowers braced his shoulders against his chair and thrust his hands far down into his pockets. There was a smile of such simple pleasure on his face as she had not seen there for months. "Ho! I've got you there," he laughed. "I've talked it over with Reef and he's making the papers out today. I'll have the deed all fixed up by tonight. I'm not giving it to Bayliss Carew. I'm giving it to *you*. It's yours. It's your—whatcha-may-call-it—your dowry!"

He was smiling at her, hoping she knew, hoping that she would see what he was doing. She could not help seeing it. He would have her live still on Bowers land. He would have that satisfaction at least, despite the Carews. Suddenly she got up and went to him—ruffled his scant hair—leaned quickly and kissed him on his weathered cheek. He blushed with shameless delight. Uncle Fred said, "Humph!"—as though he really meant it, Elsa thought. She looked up at him and laughed and he craned far out and spat in the woodbox.

"How many times have I told you not to spit in the woodbox!" Elsa's mother scolded, and in the laughter that went up at Uncle Fred's expense the tension that had held them all relaxed suddenly and Elsa felt she was at home again.

They had not yet asked about Peter Carew, but in the silence that followed, Elsa felt instinctively that the question was in the minds of all. It was Uncle Fred who introduced the subject, with a loud and raucous clearing of his throat.

"I cal'c'late this here'll be the biggest funeral there's been in this district since the mayor o' Hurley died two years ago," he observed, squinting from one to another of them, anticipating their support, prepared for their opposition. "An' I reckon fu'ther that there'll be them as'll be doin' some tall thinkin' about how Peter Carew got took off, too! He's too good a rider to be thrown by any doggone four-legged colt—an' everybody hereabouts knows it!"

Almost without realizing what she was doing Elsa set herself firmly in Peter's defense. She knew what had happened to Peter Carew—and she knew what the Carews were telling their neighbors. She had told herself, too, that she would never capitulate to the Carews, she would never become one of them, shielding their men, taking upon herself the burden of their wrongs. And yet—the gallant figure of Peter Carew—and her cherished childhood dream of him. . . . She got up and stood for a moment before the small mirror on the wall. Her eyes were unusually bright. “Well—good riders have been thrown from their horses before, Uncle Fred,” she said quietly. “Anyhow—that’s what happened to Peter Carew. Let them think what they like—let them say what they like—your own niece *knows*.”

There—that was capitulation, she thought darkly. But it was for Peter Carew she had done it—and Peter Carew was dead. She turned from the mirror quickly. “I’d better run upstairs and get my things,” she said. “Bayliss will be back before I’m ready.”

She was grateful for the need of haste. She hurried away, a sudden weight of depression upon her. The little room upstairs gave her a momentary pang of wistfulness. Had she paused to give it thought, she might have surrendered to a dismal sentimentality. She gathered her things together at once, however, packing them into an old suitcase, and returned downstairs.

“There’s Bayliss now,” Leon said as she came into the kitchen. “Give me that suitcase.”

Elsa glanced at the clock. “We’ll have to get right back,” she said. “We’ll be up again, right away. Are any of you thinking of going to the funeral?” She was a little amazed at herself for wanting them to go. She wanted people to see that her own family thought enough of Peter Carew to go to his funeral.

“I ain’t for sure that I’ll go,” her mother said. “But the others are all countin’ on goin’.” Elsa smiled; that was her mother’s way of assuring her that she would be there.

They all followed Elsa into the yard and spoke to Bayliss in their old manner now, courteous and cautious. Her mother, Elsa thought, seemed somewhat more spirited, more assured in the way she spoke and held her head. It was for all the world as though she said briskly: “Well, you saw fit to marry one of ours. That makes you no better than the rest of us.”

In the afternoon, when she sat in the church pew in Sundower with the Carews, decently enclosed with their sorrow, Elsa felt singularly apart from those others who thronged the church—country and village folk to whose company she had so recently belonged. Even her own family, all of whom were present and were gazing incredulously at her, she knew, from the remoter part of the church, seemed strangely unrelated to her. She remembered only two things distinctly of that extraordinary day.

When the red, kindly little minister said of Peter Carew that “he has not died, he has passed into a greater glory,” Elsa saw Peter riding magnificently in the wide air on his bronze horse, a bronze man who laughed like a boy. And down the road a little way, man and horse became centaur, with a shine on them that was an ache in the heart, and the air lifted them lightly up and away until they were lost to her sight in the blue-white breast of the sky. Glancing at Bayliss seated beside her, she felt deeply that he was not stricken as the others were. He was looking out of the window, at the sky, and she fancied that he, too, saw Peter there, riding—vanishing and not vanishing—in a bland sea of light.

Her other memory was of the tear-blurred face of Peter’s widow, lifted proudly as she made her way out of the church. Resolutely on her features sat the sweet, patient grief of one who has lost, but lost without the shadow of dishonor. Elsa felt with a twinge of pity the poor pride of Grace Carew’s brave pretense.

CHAPTER XIII

On a gray, rain-hung morning, two days after Peter Carew's funeral, Elsa stood on top of the Mountain with Bayliss beside her. Below them lay the Hollow, that strange, torn land, under a slowly moving gauze of mist. On the hillside halfway down there was a gentle gully where a spring rose out of the earth, grew into a tiny brook and ran down into the creek below. A group of veteran oaks stood there and the ground under them, Elsa knew, had been trampled hard and gray by Steve Bowers' cattle seeking shade. Gooseberry bushes grew on the slopes of the gully, and a company of wild plum trees and white birch. It was to the left of the gully, in the protection of the oaks, that their new house was to stand, overlooking the Hollow and built on the land on the Mountain, which belonged to Elsa. Standing there in the gray light, Elsa glanced at Bayliss and wondered if to him, as to her, the march of events seemed sheer fantasy. Her life had become a myth.

Already the men were at work on the temporary "shack" in which they would live until the new house was ready. It would be like camping out, Bayliss had said, and Elsa had almost cried out with involuntary excitement when he had told her of it. But the somber walls of the Carew house had kept her silent.

Here on the hilltop, however, there was no such need for silence. Bayliss had been telling of his plans for the farmstead, plans which he and Joel had laid out roughly together and which would be put into operation at once so that the house would be ready before the setting in of cold weather.

"You're sure you'll like it?" he was asking with a painful impersonalness, his hands thrust down into his pockets, his eyes on the hillside below them.

Elsa laughed outright, though in the next instant she thought with dismay that she had laughed at absolutely nothing. She had merely felt like laughing, happily. She sensed his quick glance at her and the blood tingled in her cheeks.

"Why—of course!" she exclaimed hastily, then bit her lips pensively. A quaint house of field stone with a low, sloping red-tiled roof—a Hans and Gretchen house, down there among the great oaks. . . . Who could help

liking it? There was much she might have said to him then—longed to say to him—and found no way of saying it.

When she stole a look at him he had turned his head away. “Well—I guess we’d better be getting back,” he said, “I’ve got to go to Hurley yet. I’ll run you back home. I hate to leave you alone so much—at the house, I mean—but there won’t be many more days of it.”

She lifted her head impetuously. “It isn’t so very trying, Bayliss. I really like Hildreth—immensely—and I manage to spend most of my time with her. Don’t worry about me—it’s worse for you, I think.”

He smiled at her then, carelessly, but she knew what was in his mind. What he had said on the night of their homecoming—was true—he had his own vanity at heart. Perhaps, indeed, it was something deeper than vanity. He feared lest she should be monstrously misunderstood by the Carew women were they to learn the true nature of their marriage. His silence was a constant reproach to her.

Elsa saw nothing of Grace Carew during those first few days after the funeral. Peter’s widow kept herself severely to her own part of the house. Through Hildreth, however, Elsa knew that Grace scarcely ate or slept, spending her days and most of her nights staring vacantly from the window of the room that had been Peter’s. Elsa had thought her incapable of such passion, such violent sorrow. But the knowledge of what was taking place in Grace Carew’s heart frightened her. This it was, then, to love a Carew man: that he took your life and destroyed it ruthlessly in his own burning, magnificent ego.

On a morning a week or so later, when Joel was to leave on a camping trip into the lake region with some of his college mates, Grace appeared unexpectedly at the breakfast table, well composed, and with a fixity in her eyes which Elsa felt was not altogether the effect of her weeping. She took her chair sedately and fastened her look at once upon Bayliss where he sat beside Elsa.

“I was watching you from my window this morning, Baysie,” she said abruptly. “I saw you coming up from the north pasture. I never noticed before how much your walk is like poor Peter’s used to be—especially in those leather leggings you’ve got on this morning. It really startled me. You have his calves—and his shoulders—though he got heavier on toward the last, of course. A man of forty-five may expect that.”

“Not all men, Grace,” Hildreth put in. “Seth is nine years older than Peter was and you wouldn’t call him stout—even now.”

But Grace seemed not to hear her. She continued staring at Bayliss with a fixed, mirrorlike brilliance in her eyes. Elsa saw him shrug impatiently. She glanced about the table and saw that every one was regarding Grace with covert dubiousness. A sudden, inexplicable sense of disaster came over Elsa. There was something not quite natural in Grace’s attitude, especially the look she had fastened upon Bayliss. Elsa met Hildreth’s eyes but they were masked in their wonted impenetrable darkness.

“Where’s Michael this morning?” Bayliss asked, by way of breaking the tension, Elsa thought.

“He was away by daylight,” Nellie remarked mildly. “He had a letter yesterday from that man Kent over north of Hurley. There’s an auction of horses over there this morning. And Michael couldn’t resist it. I declare, he goes out of his mind whenever he hears of a trade in horses anywhere.”

“*Some* would call it horses,” Hildreth said tartly, helping Joel to coffee out of the silver percolator.

Elsa saw the shallow flush that spread over Nellie’s cheeks. A baby cried somewhere in the great house and Nellie got suddenly to her feet, excusing herself. Elsa caught the look of relief that came into her face as she hastened away, glad to escape. She remembered the Nellie Block of six or seven years ago, showing her engagement ring to the girls at a church gathering in Sundower. She remembered her voice, with the little treble of pride in it: “Yes—I think it’s different—the two rubies and the diamond. Uh-huh—two-carat. It belonged to Michael’s mother, you know. *I* think it’s quaint, too. And so warm—the two rubies.”

Breakfast over, Hildreth drew Elsa aside. “Come out and help me pick some flowers,” she suggested pleasantly. “There’s no harm in making the house a little more cheerful after some one’s gone—though there are people who would say it showed a lack of respect—if they dared say it.”

She walked out in her triumphant manner, her heels making small angry clicks on the floor. Elsa followed her down the veranda steps and over the pebbled walk to the south side of the house where the lawn was littered with color.

“You probably think I’m heartless at times,” Hildreth remarked, after a silence during which they gathered purple asters and shining ribbon grass. “But I can’t stand people without gumption. Nellie is young enough to have

some influence over Mickey if she set her mind to it. The grief is she has no mind—never had. Mickey is heading the same way as the rest of them—he'll come to no good end. Not that I have any right to talk!" She sighed and straightened her back with difficulty, standing tall and slender and strangely imposing among the purple, white and pink flowers, in her staid gown of black. "No—I certainly haven't—the way I've given over to them all. But Nellie is young still, and for me it's too late. When I was her age I wasn't any better." She sighed again, with a sadness that she had not before revealed to Elsa.

They moved slowly through the curved aisles of the flower beds and past the high, luxuriantly blooming wall of sweet-peas. Hildreth talked spasmodically, almost as though she were talking to herself. Elsa had the odd and fearful sense of winding with her down through the sheen and gloom of the past, pausing with her here and there along the way to pluck a dark flower of memory. There was a childhood in Connecticut, shadowed by some obscure, half-comprehended disgrace . . . "Seth and Peter and I were all born there. Our mother was a gentlewoman, and a beauty. Her main weakness was that she loved my father too much to cross him in anything . . . even in his infidelities. She was afraid, I think, of losing him . . . she suffered in silence until something happened that she couldn't hide. She had money in her own name—somehow or other she got him away—to Illinois." Her voice trailed into a sigh and for a time she walked slowly without speaking. Elsa said nothing, knowing that Hildreth did not expect comment from her. "My mother lived only long enough to see my father prospering in Illinois . . . as the Carews have always prospered . . . cheerfully . . . at the expense of others. He lost his horses and what money he carried one night in a gambling house near Springfield . . . I can see the flourish he must have made when he told them that he would walk home—twenty miles—through a blinding blizzard. Nobody believed him. They found his body when the drifts wore down—weeks later. He had gone far off the road, of course . . . he had been drinking heavily." She told of her girlhood there—and of a romance put by for the sake of her brothers, Seth and the younger Peter, who must be helped out of their difficulties and spirited away to a new life in another state. "I think Seth's wife, dying in childbirth years before, was glad to die . . . she must have known that she was being spared a heartbreak. Grace lived to know it." Like a refrain giving unity to these fragments, there came to Elsa's mind, over and over again, the words Hildreth had spoken in those first few minutes after she and Bayliss had come home: "Your wife will share . . . with the rest of us . . . she is now a Carew."

Then, as abruptly as she had taken it up, Hildreth laid the subject aside. “We seem to have picked a good many,” she observed, straightening her back with a look of fortitude. “I guess these will do. We’ll go in now.”

When they entered the house they found Joel with his bags packed, ready to leave. Bayliss had the car in the drive, to take him to the station at Hurley. Joel bade them a light-hearted good by, waving his hat to them as he sped away in the car. Elsa could not help thinking how genial and vigorous he looked. Hildreth might have been reading her thoughts. “There’ll be some broken hearts along that boy’s trail,” she predicted, but with a touch of perverse pride in her tone, Elsa felt. “And I wouldn’t be surprised if the work of destruction had already begun. He’s spending too much of his time lately in the Hollow.”

With an inner shrinking Elsa suddenly remembered the face of Lily Fletcher on the night of the barn dance when she had come to them out of the crowd, holding Joel’s arm, her eyes over-bright above her flushed cheeks. Had Lily fallen in love with Joel, then? Lily had been engaged to marry Axel Fosberg, a young farmer who lived north of Sundower. Everybody knew about that. And yet—Elsa felt very uneasy at heart as she followed Hildreth into the house. “And how eager he was to get away, too,” Hildreth said wearily. “He’ll not be back now until the day before he leaves for college again. The men in our family never were much good at staying around where there had been a death—a death of any kind. Death of hope, especially—and pride. They get up and go.”

Hildreth’s fragmentary story told in the garden lingered with Elsa all morning, increasing in oppressiveness. In the early afternoon she felt that she could no longer bear the cloudy enchantment that brooded over the Carew house. Bayliss would not be back until evening. He had suggested that she take Fleta for a gallop to help kill time while he was away. “Fleta is yours now,” he had said dryly, “whether you want her or not. You can’t turn her out of the pasture, anyhow.” Well—perhaps she would ride as far as Fanny Ipsmiller’s—and drop in on her mother for supper on the way back.

It was after dark when she returned to the Carews’. A light shone in Bayliss’ room. He was probably sitting there waiting for her, she thought with a little flurry of excitement. But Bayliss met her at the head of the driveway. He had just come back from town. He helped her to the ground and called to one of the men to take charge of Fleta, then went with her into the house. They went upstairs at once, and Elsa, stepping into the room

ahead of Bayliss, saw that Grace Carew sat within, fanning herself gently by an open window. The fact of her being in Bayliss' room surprised Elsa, but there was something in the woman's attitude which startled her even more. Elsa managed to say, "Why—hello! I—it's terribly warm, isn't it?" Grace made no response except to stare at her with a look of chilling appraisal. It was the first opportunity to speak to her that Elsa had had since coming to the house. "I've been wanting to speak to you, Mrs. Carew," she said quickly, "to tell you how very deeply I felt over your loss. You can't know _____"

"Indeed?" Grace lifted her head sharply, narrowing her eyes. "But how could you possibly feel anything at all about it? I don't understand. It's not quite the same as if you were one of the family, in any real sense." She turned her eyes with a sudden dimpling, tender smile upon Bayliss, then got up from her place and moved slowly toward him. Elsa felt the burning flush that crept up into the roots of her hair. She removed her hat and short jacket and laid them on the couch. Then she walked to the open window and sat down in the faint breeze that stirred the curtains. She pushed back her hair; under her hand her brow was hot and moist.

Bayliss had not said a word. He had tossed his hat aside and had thrown himself into a chair to light a cigarette. Elsa saw Grace draw a chair close to his and sit down. On her face was the fond look that took Elsa back years to the day when the two Carew women had come for the first time to the Bowers farm, and with them a small boy who looked to Elsa like a raspberry.

"You're probably surprised to find me here, Baysie dear," Grace began comfortably. "It's the first time I've intruded like this—except that time when you had bronchitis and didn't tell anybody about it. Do you remember, Baysie?"

"Don't you think you might drop that pet name, Aunt Grace?" Bayliss suggested pleasantly.

Grace drew a small, hurt sigh. Elsa, looking at her and struggling to control her anger and chagrin, thought the eyes of Peter's widow were as bright and sharp as a bird's.

"Well, then—Bayliss. Though why you should take it into your head to object—now—to—" She glanced at Elsa out of the corners of her eyes, her lips tightening.

“For the lord’s sake, Aunt Grace!” Bayliss exploded. “There never was a time, as far back as I can remember, when I didn’t object to that insufferable name!”

Grace drew a deep, quivering breath, her fan slipping to her lap. “I went out today—for the first time,” she told Bayliss. “Nellie and I drove down to spend the afternoon with her mother. She tells me that Nate Brazell is going to marry that girl, Zenka Wolf—from south of Hurley. You remember her, of course. It seems that old man Wolf owes Brazell some money and they’ve arranged the marriage between them. What a disgraceful thing, when you think of it! Zenka is really a lovely creature—of her class, I mean.”

Bayliss got to his feet, his arms crossed, his face reddening. Elsa watched him through half-shut lids. “Just what is on your mind, Aunt Grace?” he asked evenly, his eyes fixed upon her. “I have no interest whatever in Nate Brazell’s affairs. The fact is, Grace, you’re making a very unpleasant situation here. If you’re trying to embarrass me in front of Elsa, I might as well tell you that I kept nothing from Elsa when I asked her to marry me. I told her about Zenka—everything. If there is anything she doesn’t know about me, I am prepared to tell her. Elsa and I have understood each other from the first.”

At first Elsa had not understood Grace’s purpose in speaking of Zenka. It was plain that Bayliss understood, however. Elsa sat frozen at the woman’s insolence.

“Of course,” Grace went on, her voice sweet and pleading, “you *would* do that. You’re so like Peter! But you make the mistake of thinking that others are as straightforward as you are yourself, Baysie.” Elsa saw Bayliss wince, whether at the use of the name or because of some new annoyance. “I have been afraid from the first,” Grace continued, with a complete disregard of Elsa’s presence in the room, “afraid for you. You do things so rashly. I had my eyes opened today—Nellie’s mother told me the whole story.”

With some remnant of humor still intact, Elsa compared the face of Grace Carew to a piece of shirred pink silk that had been reduced suddenly to a flat plane with a hot iron. She caught a glance from Bayliss. He was looking at her with a humorous, satirical twist to his lips. “Well, Aunt Grace,” he said wearily, “what did the old girl tell you? Let’s have it!”

Grace sprang up, catching at his coat. “You mustn’t laugh at me, Baysie dear! What I’m telling you is true—everybody knows it! They’re talking about you and laughing at you, dear, because a little hussy out of the Hollow took you for your money—and jilted the man she was engaged to marry—

just so she could marry you as soon as you asked her! What decent girl would spend the night out with a man before she married him, even——”

“Aunt Grace!” Bayliss broke out suddenly. The thing had become intolerable. Elsa, fearing Bayliss’ anger, got quickly to her feet and walked calmly to where he stood. She felt genuine pity for the woman, ludicrously abandoned to what Elsa now realized was an absurd jealousy. She stood beside Bayliss, feeling tall and slender and cool as she looked down at Grace. She heard Bayliss’ short, angry laugh, then felt him slip his arm about her, loosely.

Grace opened her mouth to continue, her chin quivering, but Bayliss interrupted her. “You are not yourself, Aunt Grace,” he said sharply. He cleared his throat roughly to steady his voice. “If you were, you’d have better sense than to listen to such rot.”

Grace drew herself erect, her chin pulled back. She surveyed Bayliss tremblingly. “What do you know about her, Bayliss? Tell me that. Have you heard what the whole district knows, or——”

“Please—Aunt Grace!” Bayliss said, and Elsa felt his fingers tighten on her arm. “We don’t let the whole district into our affairs. I knew a year ago that Elsa cared for me. We could have announced our engagement long ago, if we had wanted to do so. We didn’t. Why we didn’t was our own business. I suppose we should have been married in the church at Sundower and all the old women would have lived happily ever after.”

Bayliss’ deception penetrated Elsa’s being like a white flame. She looked up and found Grace Carew’s eyes upon her for the first time, searching her.

“Yes—what Bayliss says is true, Grace!” she said in a low voice, strange even to herself. Bayliss looked at her then with a deep and friendly smile that turned her faint. For an instant she forgot about Grace and the entire heartless scene. She was barely aware that Grace Carew crept out of the room without another word. She heard Bayliss say, “You won’t have to put up with any more of this. We’ll move up to the shack the first thing in the morning, even if it isn’t quite ready. And by the way—you’re a darned good sport, little enemy!” He had stepped behind her for his pipe as he spoke. She dared not turn to look at him. She moved through a blur of tears into the other room, closing the door behind her as she went. There she sank into a chair beside the window, where she sat for a long time looking out across the lawn at the tall cottonwoods dimly filigreed against the night sky of summer.

CHAPTER XIV

On the journey to the Mountain, Elsa sat beside Bayliss on the hayrack. Now and then she stole a sideways glance at him and smiled to herself with secret happiness. They were leaving the hated stronghold of the Carews. On the Mountain she would be in her own realm. She would have a sense of power there, away from the oppressive Carew spell. In her heart she cherished a secret—she would dare to release, there, the emotions that her old obstinacy had held in check.

Bayliss had thrown his wide straw hat on the load behind him. In the brilliant air a faint line of copper was drawn along the crest of his dark head. Elsa looked down from that copper line to the squarish, sunburnt face with its black, minnow-shaped brows, and to the strangely colored eyes with their odd droop at the corners made by the full upper lids. That indolent droop had always angered her. It had appeared to her a significant mark of the Carews to whom all things came so easily. Looking at Bayliss now, she was aware that her anger had changed to a growing excitement. There was no trace in his face of that hard, whimsical smile she had always looked for there. Instead there was a set bleakness that made her heart swing like a painful weight in her body.

Elsa set herself diligently to the task of putting the shack into some sort of order. Bayliss had wanted to fetch a girl from Sundower to help her but she had dismissed the suggestion with an exclamation of impatience. This was to be their own place—their very own. She would do the work herself. Bayliss made several trips to the Carew house, returning each time through the fields that lay within sight of Elsa as she watched for his coming from the door of the shack—and each time she saw him she was caught up in a clear ecstasy.

All day long a high wind hunted through the sky. The sound of the carpenters' hammers coming to her from up the slope where the men were working on the new house reminded her of the time when she had gone with her father to look at the building of the great Carew house to the south. That day seemed as remote as a dream out of some other life. The sweet, dry smell of ripe grain that her father had not yet reaped mingled headily with the pungent smell of new lumber. The vast sea of sun moved over the prairie, with its liquid change of color from dawn to dusk, and low against

the horizon clouds journeyed, white and hot as bellying shapes of blown glass. These were the first days of harvest again—the season of reaping, stacking and threshing, that life might continue. Thrills of wistfulness and sheer delight flowed through Elsa all day. She saw in fancy what it would be to live here with Bayliss, on this height above the Hollow: they would see the dark, crinkled fields in a wet spring; they would see the frail shoots that traced a pale green design through the red brown earth in early summer; they would look out upon the swaying gold of the ripe grain in August; and they would be intimates of the stark, hollow prairie under the autumn sky. They would live here, close to beauty, and pity, and growth, and death. What was life if you could not experience these, as the earth experienced them!

In the middle of the day, when they paused in their work for a hasty lunch, Elsa said to Bayliss: “I’ve been wondering this morning whether you have ever had that intimate feeling about the earth that I have—that I’ve always had, as long as I can remember. You see, Bay, the Carews have never endured with the soil as we have—here in the Hollow.”

Bayliss laughed gloomily. “And I wonder,” he said, “whether you have ever taken the trouble to inquire into *how* I feel about the soil—or about anything, for that matter.”

She pressed her lips together over a smile which threatened to leap out into laughter of pure joy. A strong desire seized her suddenly to jump up and ruffle his hair, for no other reason than that she wanted to feel it in her fingers. Then she would kiss him and run away, she thought, up the slope of the Mountain, under the wind and the sun. But some inexplicable inertia held her.

Just before sundown the workmen left and Elsa was alone on the Mountain. Bayliss had gone on his last trip to his father’s place. Elsa quickly prepared supper on the small cookstove in the kitchen of the shack, then she hurried to dress herself for Bayliss’ return. She bathed in the cool water from the little creek near by and sat in a loose robe for many minutes before the dressing table Bayliss had brought her from Hurley, taking note of the small immediate things of her person which it seemed to her she had never before observed. With a hand mirror she noted the upward curling of the short light-chestnut hair at the nape of her neck; a tiny mole on her left breast; a scar on her right knee, left there when she was twelve years old and had tried to crawl too hastily through a barbed wire fence. Seeing these things with the wonder of discovery, she thought, “This is I—Elsa Bowers. These things are mine—*mine!* They are me! Soon they will belong to me no

more. They are going from me to some one else—and he doesn't know! This that is me is going to Bayliss Carew.”

Fright and pain grew over her. She pressed her fingers over her eyes and then, opening them, looked out upon the sweet, trembling colors of the evening sky. She heard in the long, gentle grass a little distance away the note of a single meadow-lark, plaintive in the stillness. Rapture flowed through her body in an endless circuit.

She put on a blue dress that brought the blue out of the gray in her eyes, and arranged her hair softly above her brows. Then she decked the table with a white cloth and a bouquet of purple-blue gentians she had gathered just outside the door. At the sound of a step approaching, quick color came into her cheeks, warmed into her temples. That would be Bayliss. She turned, however, to find Lily Fletcher stepping into the doorway. She fought back the feeling of annoyance that arose within her suddenly.

“Why—Lily!” she exclaimed.

“Hello, Elsa!” Lily greeted her. “Now don't drop dead away just because I found out where you were hiding. Two of your builders stopped to talk with Pa on their way home and they told us you had moved up here. Oh—gosh—I've been walking till I'm all in!”

Elsa placed a chair for her. “You mean you've walked all the way from home—since the men left here?” she asked her.

“Walked—I've done nothing but walk—day and night, it seems to me—for weeks. I've been walking like sin.” She paused and looked quickly about the room, then let her eyes rest on the table set for supper, with the bowl of gentians in the center. “Bay hasn't come in yet, has he?”

“He's gone for the last load—back to the house. He ought to be along any minute, though. I thought it was he when I heard you coming.”

Lily bit her lips distractedly and looked anxiously through the doorway. Two spots of high color flamed on her cheeks. Her knees rubbed together nervously. A spasm of fear ran coldly through Elsa as she looked at her.

“Listen, Elsa,” Lily said quickly, “I've got to talk to you. I'll go out of my mind if I don't. I wanted to speak to you the night of the dance—but I wasn't sure—and you left before I had a chance.” She swallowed desperately. “You know I've been going around a lot with Joel since he came back. I've been crazy about him, Elsa—crazy. I haven't seen much of Axel—I haven't wanted to see him.” Her voice had risen until it was almost hysterical. “Now—I can't see him. I can't face him—and tell him!”

“You mean you can’t tell him you’re in love with Joel, Lily?” Elsa asked, beating back a dark fear that had come over her.

“Of course—of course—but I—I don’t mean that. Oh—Elsa, I thought you’d understand—you being married now and—don’t make me say it, Elsa—don’t!”

Elsa got to her feet, staring down at the girl as the sickening surmise grew upon her. Irrelevantly, she noted that despite her distress Lily had not forgotten to curl her hair, which shone as brightly now as it had shone in the lamplight on the night of the dance. Elsa walked to the door and looked out, trying to steady her mind. Bayliss had already driven in from the road and was getting out of his car at the foot of the hill. She turned and found Lily sobbing convulsively. Elsa regarded her with amazement. She had never attributed any great depth of feeling to Lily Fletcher. She hurried to her, caressed her hair, spoke soothingly to her, scarcely knowing what she said.

“Don’t do that, Lily, please! Bayliss is coming—he’s at the foot of the hill. Try to look natural—quickly. Listen, Lily—does Joel know? Did you tell him?”

“I told him—the night before he went away,” Lily said miserably. “Oh—Elsa—and me that’s never—well you know me well enough to know I wouldn’t think of—” Her voice trailed away brokenly. Tears started from her eyes again.

“Hush—hush up!” Elsa said. “What did he say? Didn’t he offer to do anything about it?” Even as she spoke, Elsa felt the tragic futility of her question.

Lily tossed her bright hair. “What *would* he say? When I hinted that we ought to get married he didn’t even seem to hear me. Anyhow, I wasn’t going to throw myself at him, was I? If he doesn’t want me I’d rather throw myself into the creek than——”

“Don’t talk like an idiot,” Elsa broke out. “Let’s say no more about it just now. Get a good sleep tonight and I’ll be over to see you tomorrow. Come on—straighten up! Here’s Bayliss now.”

“Sleep!” Lily said hopelessly.

Bayliss came in carrying the last of his belongings from the Carews’. “Hello, Lily!” he called from the doorway. “See now what it means to get married, eh?”

Lily got up from her chair and started for the door. “Hello, Bay!” she replied, then turned to Elsa. “I’ve got to go now,” she said in a subdued voice. “Ma is expecting me back for supper. I told her I was just going over to see Fanny Ipsmiller. I’ve got to hurry back.”

“Oh—I thought you might stay here for supper,” Elsa said cheerfully. “But if you have to go—it wouldn’t take you a minute to drive her down, would it, Bay?”

“Glad to,” Bayliss assented absently. He set aside what he carried in his arms and stepped out of the door. Lily followed, giving Elsa a desolate look of farewell.

When they had gone, Elsa seated herself at the table and rested her chin upon the palm of her hand. Where now was the sweet burden of her mood of an hour ago? She felt stripped, despoiled of something indescribably precious that she had found. She might have been Lily herself—she *was* Lily. She was heart and soul of that life in the Hollow that a Carew had violated in the princely Carew tradition. She looked at the little table she had set with the white cloth and the spreading blue blur of flowers. Her throat tightened to an aching knot. She shut her eyes so tightly that they hurt, but the tears slipped out at the corners and crept down her cheeks.

After an age, it seemed, the door opened and she knew that Bayliss stood behind her. She got up slowly and moved to the stove where the food stood ready. She heard him remove his hat and coat, heard him wash at the sink that had been built against the wall. She placed the hot dishes on the table as he came and stood for a moment letting his eyes wander appreciatively over what she had done to make their first supper an event. She saw a smile light his face as he reached out and plucked one of the gentians off its stem, turning to her with an odd glance. “Little enemy,” he said, “you’re there! The place looks great—and I never saw you looking half so good. If you were in love with me now, by the Lord Harry, I’d kiss you!” Elsa smiled in spite of her depression and they sat down. “By the way,” he said, “what’s the matter with Lily? Hadn’t she been crying or——”

“Lily,” Elsa replied, doing her utmost to steady her voice, “is going to have a child.”

Bayliss whistled softly. “Good God—whose?”

“Joel’s.”

The silence that hung between them then screamed into Elsa’s ears. Against it the crackle of a stick of wood in the stove sounded like a shot; the

churring of the frogs in the darkening world outside came deafeningly through the windows.

“Are you—sure?” Bayliss asked, his brows knitting closely. “Does Joel know anything about it?”

“Lily told him about it before he went away,” Elsa said, in a voice that was very calm.

Bayliss struck the table with his fist. “The damn fool!” he exploded. “The crazy, damn fool!”

He fell into an impenetrable silence then, scarcely touching his food. Against that silence Elsa’s hopes and fears battled, as she waited for him to speak. Hope told her that he might, somehow—in this one moment while she waited—forget his old arrogance, his heartless indifference, the high-handed cruelty that had been part of his birthright. Why could he not forget—just now when it meant so much to her? Just now—just now—she said over and over to herself in an agony of yearning. Hoping fiercely, she sensed nevertheless that he was slowly drawing his defenses about himself and his family. There seemed actually to be an accompaniment of motion and sound as those defenses settled down like a great stone wall about the frailties of the Carews. And still she waited, watching him, her spine, the backs of her legs stiffening against her chair.

When she could stand it no longer, she asked him, “Are you going to write to Joel about it?”

The look he gave her awakened a demon of hate within her. Her hands beneath the table were gripped so that her fingers ached. “Elsa,” he said, “there are some things a man will not do. One of them is to put his hand into an affair—especially an affair of this kind—when it’s none of his business. If Lily Fletcher is fool enough to let herself in for a thing like this, she has only herself to blame. I doubt very much that she was reluctant. Besides, Lily may be lying—probably is, in fact, when she names Joel. If she’s a girl of—of that class, there’s simply no telling who is responsible. I’d rather not hear anything more about it.”

Elsa pushed her chair back from the table and got to her feet. She could feel the color ebbing from her face; her lips were dry and rigid, her eyes burning. She stood erect, looked unseeingly toward Bayliss, her hands clenched before her. All the strength of her body rushed together in a central destroying passion against him. Again, as once long ago, the primitive impulse seized her to strike him squarely in the face.

Bayliss had got up and had taken a step toward her, his face dark under scowling brows.

Words rushed to her lips, stinging, burning. “I was afraid of that! I hoped—perhaps—hoped you might see the other side—just once. I hoped—because I thought I loved you—at last. I thought I discovered that—last night. And today I admitted it. I dressed for you—set this table for you—brought those flowers for you—waited for you—to tell you. Do you understand? I was a fool—a silly fool. I know it now. I hate you more than I’ve ever hated any one—any one.”

Her eyes were turned upon him with slashing fury. She heard his short laugh, saw him step quickly toward her. She experienced a blinding flash in her brain, and in the next instant she struck him on the mouth with all the vicious power of her body behind the blow. Then she felt his fingers close suddenly about her wrist, crushing the flesh down into the bone, drawing her close to him. All at once he freed her wrist, caught the mass of her hair in his hands, and kissed her mouth, bruising her lips down against her teeth. In that moment she felt a violence of warmth surge through her body, radiate from her and envelop her in a quivering haze, draw from her a shameless, thrilling response to him. She swayed and he held her and kissed her again, lightly, then let her go. She leaned inertly against the wall behind her, her eyes closed, her breath coming in gasps.

Bayliss had gone out, she knew. She had heard the door close behind him. She turned, and although her eyes were wide open she walked with a sense of groping into her bedroom and locked the door after her. Her mind knew the significance of that—it was the first time she had locked a door between herself and Bayliss Carew.

CHAPTER XV

Summer died suddenly that year, in a night of wind that screamed through the Hollow like a mad thing. In the wild, bleak dawn that followed there was scarcely a leaf left clinging to a tree, scarcely a shivering petal left along the side of the Mountain where the sturdy autumn flowers had grown in wild profusion. The world stood barren until twilight, the tall marsh grass leaning under the wind, the water in the slough broken and flecked with white. Then a cold rain began to fall, shrouding the wide gray fields, the swollen ditches where the stricken black weeds were, and the naked ridges that lay colorless under the low skies.

Elsa stood at the window of the new house and looked out through the forlorn drizzle. They had moved up from the shack only two days before, and now—it would be three months tomorrow since she had married Bayliss Carew. Three months. Peter had died—and a few weeks later, old Sarah Phillips. Pretty Lily Fletcher had married Axel Fosberg, shutting a dark knowledge within her heart because of Axel's pride. Elsa could look down across the Hollow to where Axel had built a small house for himself and Lily on the quarter-section of land he had bought from old John Fletcher. People said they were very happy together. Less than a month ago Nate Brazell had taken Zenka Wolf for wife, closing his door against the world and upon his own brutality. That was the life of the Hollow, Elsa thought—Elder's Hollow where she had lain in the pigweed house on blue afternoons in summer and dreamed up into the skies, where she had run home on cold November days to thrust her numb feet into dry woolen stockings and sit before the fire while her mother cooked the supper, where she had gone skating with Reef on the creek in the moonlight and laughed when the frost nipped her nose and brought the blood tingling into her cheeks, and where she had plucked the first downy crocus-cups from the very edge of ragged snowdrifts in the warm days of early spring. Out there lay the world of Steve Bowers who had forgotten how to laugh, of Uncle Fred growing old and brittle like a dried twig of cottonwood, of Reef plodding through the slow years with his face toward an unrisen star, of Fanny Ipsmiller and her clumsy infatuation for the despicable Nels, and of Joe Tracy singing his way across the fields of a June night and filling the hours with tales of his wanderings.

It had been her world, too—Elsa Bowers' world—before she had forsaken it—before it had forsaken her, rather, for that was what she felt now as she stood looking from the window at the cold drizzle that covered the land. She had blundered stupidly away from that world, thinking to escape the crushing sordidness of the Hollow in the fabulous world of the Carews. She knew now that she had been blinded by her stark fears—and by her vain hopes. Above all, she had been blinded by her own pride. She had known that ever since the night Lily Fletcher had come to her with her secret and had precipitated that violent scene between herself and Bayliss. In the sharp agony of the night's solitude she had admitted to herself at last that neither fear nor hope of any kind had drawn her to Bayliss Carew, however they might have blinded her to what she was doing. It was love—flaming, passionate love—love that had smoldered in her heart down through the years of her growing; love that had turned inward upon itself because its object had seemed so remote, so unattainable; love that had become a fierce hate because she had no other answer to give to the cruel arrogance of these mad Carews. It would have been easy to go to Bayliss that night, in spite of what had passed between them because of Lily Fletcher, humbling herself in her hunger for love, yielding to some wild desire for her own annihilation. It was thus the Carew women had always gone to their men; it was thus Lily Fletcher had gone in her stupidity to Joel Carew; it was thus she herself might have gone to Joe Tracy in a moment of forgetfulness, subjecting her spirit forever to the dull, crass tyranny of her body. She was glad that something stronger than her own deep yearning for love had won that fight for her, won it for Bayliss Carew, too, though he knew nothing of it.

She had been glad when she had looked from the door of the shack the next morning and had seen him among the builders on the slope above, standing a little apart from the men, in the full flood of early sunlight, directing the work as if he had been to the manner born. She had stood there in the doorway for a long time, letting her eyes roam over the reedy waste in the southern end of the Hollow, before he had at last come down to her. Then he had paused in front of her, smiled slowly down at her, and asked her forgiveness for what he had done the night before. "That was just plain brute, Elsa." She would never forget the sound of his voice. She had looked at him, then turned quickly away again so that he might not see the burning in her cheeks or the uncontrolled tears that came hot upon her lashes. He had taken her hands then and kissed them lightly, saying nothing more, and had gone back up the slope to his work. She had stood and watched him go, knowing that he was suffering, yearning toward him with all her heart, yet barbarously obdurate because she could not be anything else. And so they

had gone through the lissom, flaunting days of late summer and early autumn, like phantoms in armor, she had often thought, passing and repassing in a gray half-light that was as impenetrable as abysmal night, signaling to each other in grotesque and mocking gestures.

From where she stood at the window she could see Bayliss moving about among the buildings on the slope below, a shabby felt hat pulled down over his brow, an old gray sweater showing below the bottom of his blue denim coat, his trousers disappearing in knee boots. He had spent most of the day at the Carew place, where he had gone to talk with his father about horses they had bought the week before in Hurley. Elsa had looked from the window a dozen times during the late afternoon to see if he had come back. It was not until the rain had begun to fall, however, that she saw him drive along the road, not from the southward, as she had expected, but from the direction of Sundower and Nate Brazell's place. He had not come up to the house, but had turned at once to help Gorham, their one hired man, carry into shelter a dozen or more sacks of feed that had come down from Sundower that afternoon. Elsa's eyes followed him as he strode back and forth at his task. She had never thought a Carew capable of the amount of work Bayliss had done during the past few weeks. When he was not busy getting the buildings ready against the coming of winter, he was in the fields laying out the work for the spring months, or walking through the Hollow where the wild land joined his own, thinking his own thoughts, turning over in his mind plans of which Elsa never learned anything. Many times during those weeks it had come to her that Bayliss Carew might be slowly breaking under her obduracy, that he was turning from her in those long silences while he walked the fields. No proud man can spend his days in secret torment and remain the same. Perhaps he was working down there in the rain this very minute so that he might not have to come to the house and go on with the ludicrous mockery of their marriage. Elsa bit at the tip of her little finger, watching him through tears that came from the very pain of looking at him.

At last she turned away to the task of making supper. She lit the lamp and set it on its shelf near the range. In the spring they would have electric light, Bayliss had said—always building for a future, *their* future. She had only herself and Bayliss to cook for. With characteristic delicacy Bayliss had provided Gorham with quarters of his own in the shack they had occupied during the building of the new house. The shack had been turned to use as a tool shed, but Bayliss had left one room and the kitchen completely furnished for the man's use. Gorham, a confirmed bachelor, was pleased

with the arrangement and Elsa treated him frequently to some savory dish of her own cooking.

With supper well on the way, Elsa went into the dining-room and set the table hurriedly. From old habit, she stood back and let her eyes run over the table with its fine china and its silver lying under the soft purple-gray bloom of dusk. She lit the yellow candles, rearranged the brittle, brilliant flowers she had carried in from the hillside the day before the wind had swept the country, then placed two chairs for herself and Bayliss. Again she stood back and eyed the table critically. A sudden pain struck through her. She felt herself a stranger here, even in the moment of her pride in all the beautiful things with which she was surrounded. She and Bayliss had spent a week together in the city, selecting what they needed by way of furnishing the new house. It had been a difficult time for her, the more so because Bayliss had been so gentle, so careful to give his approval to her every choice. And yet, difficult as those days had been, there was more than mere harmony in the furnishings of this house; they bore the established charm of things that were loved. And Elsa loved them with a proud love.

Especially she loved the living-room. She had had Gorham build a fire there in the late afternoon to take the chill out of the air. From where she stood she could look through the open doorway and see the shadows playing like ragged goblins over the warm walls, the low, heavy beams of the ceiling, the polished floor, the rich-napped rugs, the deep hospitable chairs, the tight and orderly backs of the books in their cases, and over the shining gloom of the piano.

At the sound of a footfall from without she felt a sudden unsteady wavering of her body. It was Bayliss coming into the small entry at the side of the house where he always hung his outer work clothes. She heard him clear his throat and visualized abruptly the stern set of his mouth, the suggestion of rigidity in the way he held his head. She heard him open the door and come into the house with an even tread, as though he were counting his steps as he came. He would go at once to his room and appear presently, ready for supper, his clothes changed, his hair brushed into the best order he could give it, his whole attitude one of unnatural, pleasant calm. She turned away quickly and hurried into the kitchen to finish her preparations for supper.

They were at the table. Bayliss had been telling Elsa of his day with Seth Carew. They had had a letter from Joel telling them of an opportunity that had come to him to enter a prosperous firm of architects next summer. Michael's wife, Nellie, had had word from her brother in Texas. He had

been using his own money and some of Michael's in a scheme to develop his oil holdings in the south. Michael would be a wealthy man before another year had gone. Old Seth himself had sold a herd of young Holsteins to a dealer from Wisconsin and was buying another half-section of land adjoining his own on the southward side. Elsa had listened to the news with an unreasoning resentment smoldering within her. Always going forward, these Carews, always growing richer and more sure of themselves!

"You may be glad yet, little enemy, that you married into the family," Bayliss teased her, smiling at her with his mouth at a crooked, whimsical angle.

Their glances held for an imponderable second, then Elsa looked away, her lashes narrowing with a slight nervous flutter.

"But I haven't told you the real news," he went on quickly. "Hildreth was getting ready to come over with it this morning when I drove in. They're going to give us a surprise party."

"Who?" Elsa asked.

"The district—everybody! They'll all be here, don't worry. You knew you'd be in for it sooner or later, of course. They're coming down on us tomorrow night. Hildreth tells me they've bought you an eight-day clock—an unholy fright, probably, but you can hide it away an hour after they've left."

Elsa was appalled. To what farcical lengths would she and Bayliss have to go to satisfy the curious that here was a happy marriage indeed? Involuntarily her eyes met his across the table and she saw in them a look of ironical amusement.

"You see," he went on in his casual manner, "these friends of ours have their own ideas of what a well-conducted marriage ought to be. The only thing we can do is try to be game about it—and then forget it as soon as it's over. Hildreth is coming up to help you get ready for them." He leaned toward her suddenly and his voice became very gentle. "As a matter of fact, Elsa," he said, "I'd give anything in the world to spare you this. I don't think it matters so much to me, but I can guess pretty well how you feel about it. Just let us forget it."

"What time will Hildreth be over?" Elsa heard herself ask in a voice that was surprisingly quiet.

"She said she'd be over early in the afternoon, right after lunch, I suppose. She's coming alone—Grace isn't feeling any too chipper. It looks

to me as if Aunt Grace is going to be a problem for the family before long. I talked with her today, just before I left. I thought I saw a change in her—something—I don't know just what it is. She was looking out of her window when I came into the room and spoke to her. I must have frightened her. She jumped out of her chair and turned on me with a queer look." He paused for a moment, frowning. "When I apologized she smiled and said she had thought it was Peter when I spoke. I didn't think anything of it just then—she has always talked about how much I reminded her of Peter—but when she told me that she had been talking to Peter several times lately, right there in her own room, well, I began to wonder. It may be nothing more than the nervous shock of Peter's death showing its effects; it must have hit her harder than any of us thought at the time. She isn't the kind that talks much about such things. On the other hand, it may be something more serious."

Elsa's mind seized cruelly upon the thought that Grace was simply paying her price for having married a Carew. The thought frightened her; there was something darkly ominous about it. She hurried into small talk about the house—of what Gorham had said when she had asked him to build a fire in the living-room; of how she must ride over to her mother's first thing in the morning; and of what Bayliss must get in Sundower if they were to be ready for their visitors tomorrow night.

They were seated together at last on the couch before the fire in the living-room. Bayliss had shaken the ash from his pipe and was bending forward, looking into the fire.

"I drove through the Hollow this afternoon, Elsa," he said quietly, almost as if he were talking to himself, Elsa thought. "You know—I've been mulling an idea over in my mind for weeks—and I've wanted to talk to you about it. It isn't as easy to talk to you about things as it might be."

"I'm sorry for that, Bay," she said, painfully. "I don't try to make it hard for you."

She heard his quick laugh. "I know—I know. I'm not kicking. Three months ago—I told you I'd wait for you to quit hating me. The truth is, little enemy—I had no idea it was going to be so damned hard—this waiting business. That's why I've been working on this idea of mine. I've had to give myself something to think about."

Elsa glanced quickly at his face with the glow of the fire upon it. What she saw there was the hurt look of a boy—or was it the look she had seen once on the face of a boy grown to young manhood, standing with a bridle in his hand, asking her to take his favorite saddle-horse and keep it for her

own while he was away? She could have wept for pity—wept for him and for herself—wept for the whole crazy pattern of human life in a mad world.

“Tell me about it,” she said, afraid to say more.

“I’ve got to be planning something, Elsa—looking forward to something—doing more than just raising livestock and waiting for the spring. I’ve been looking over the Hollow.”

A vague presentiment of evil swept Elsa suddenly. It was the feeling she had always had when a Carew set foot upon Bowers land. Struggle against it as she might—a Carew had no place in the Hollow. She waited for Bayliss to go on.

“You and I, Elsa—you and I might take that land down there and make it worth something—get a good engineer to look it over—drain it—clear it—make something of it—make it grow something besides wild rice and mosquitoes.”

Elsa said nothing at first. She could think only of the wild absurdity of the idea. She had always lived within sight of the Hollow; it had been as much a part of her world as the clouds and the blue skies had been, or the constant parade of the seasons. And Bayliss Carew was asking her to help him change it—level it—make it yield a profitable harvest. How could she expect him to understand her love for its strange earthy ruin, its charmed squalor, its dingy and pathetic mystery?

“It would mean a lot of work—and expense, wouldn’t it, Bayliss?” she asked him absently.

“Probably. We’d have to find out all about that before we undertook it. But I believe it would pay well in the end. We could get the land for next to nothing to start with, of course. What if it did mean work and a little money? Think of the satisfaction there’d be in doing a job like that. It’s funny no one has thought of it before now.”

When she looked at him it was to see something of Peter, something of Hildreth, in his face—an elfin humor, a look at once wistful, appealing, aloof. She found no voice in her to reply to him. She saw him glance up at her, then bend toward the fire again and examine his pipe intently.

“Of course, there would be difficulties to meet. I have a good hunch that Nate Brazell would bring on a war right now if he knew what was in our minds. I’ve run into him three or four times lately down there. He was out after ducks when I came by today. He probably wants to see the place just as it is.”

“In his own way,” Elsa suggested, “even Nate Brazell may have his sentimental side.”

Bayliss turned to her quickly. “So—that’s your answer, then! You don’t want any one to lay a hand on the Hollow. I used to think you hated the place.”

She felt the color mount suddenly to her cheeks. “I have hated it, Bayliss,” she said unsteadily, “and I have loved it. It would probably sound very silly of me if I were to tell you exactly how I feel about it. I’m not at all sure that I could tell you if I tried.”

A heavy silence fell between them. Elsa, thinking of Nate Brazell, wondered irrelevantly if he had chanced to raise a flock of red-winged blackbirds anywhere among the reeds that afternoon. Then she realized that Bayliss had got to his feet and was standing with his back to the fire, looking down at her.

“Elsa,” he said, in a voice that was curiously gentle in spite of its tone of cold reproof, “I’ve been waiting for years—just to find you grown up. I’ve been waiting for you to get beyond that age of ten—or was it eleven, past? The truth is you’ve never quite got over the fact that I stepped on your bare toe that day when no one was looking. But you’re going to get over it. Some day you’re going to think of *me*—not merely the things about me that you hate.”

He stood before her in silence for a moment, then turned and went out of the room. Presently she heard him close the outer door and she was left alone, bewildered with anger at his inexorable assurance, shaken by the compelling truth of what he had said.

After a long time she got up and went out, closing the door softly behind her. It had ceased raining and a great stillness had come down upon the Mountain. There was a light in the window of the shack on the slope below, where Gorham was. Listening, she heard Gorham’s voice, then Bayliss’ answering laugh. After a little, she turned and went back into the house.

Elsa rode to the Bowers farm next morning, looking scarcely to left or right through a landscape shrunken under the dun brown of autumn. It had turned unexpectedly warm and she took her way along the southern edge of the Hollow till she came to the old trail that led across her father’s fields and up through the cottonwood grove to the house. As she came out of the cottonwoods she let her eyes drift over the buildings of her father’s farm.

How small and gray they seemed, how self-conscious and apologetic! The single plum tree on that little knoll toward the barn seemed now to be gathering its wind-flayed limbs in toward its narrow bosom, like a suspicious and emaciated old man. Yet, for all the outward pathos of this place, there was the doorway of the haymow in which she had lain on her stomach one hot August afternoon and looked down with fierce eyes upon the princely young head of Bayliss Carew. And there, where a frugal extension of the vegetable garden lay now with its autumn shards, had been the perilous pigweed jungle and the inviolable house in its green heart. Bayliss . . . Bayliss Carew. . . .

Beyond the buildings, in the little pasture to the west, a few brindle cows and two or three horses still grazed optimistically at the wan grass. In the field that bordered the pasture, Leon was plowing up ground that had lain fallow through the summer. He saw her now and waved his cap, the sun glinting in his rough, bright hair, so much fairer than her own. Leon, the little boy asleep in the pigweed house—Leon, the tall youth with finely-set bones . . . turned under in the furrow he was striking, his very life made part of the breathing soil.

It was her mother's day for baking. There was an air of important bustle about the kitchen that brought old memories trooping into Elsa's mind as she watched her mother hurrying from pantry to table, from table to stove, her sleeves rolled above her thick elbows, her hard, capable hands covered with flour.

"Bayliss is gone to town and won't be back until this afternoon," Elsa announced as she removed her hat. "I can stay and eat with you—if you have plenty?"

"Plenty? I haven't seen the day yet when we didn't have enough in the cupboard to feed one of our own—and I hope I'll not live to see it." She rubbed the end of her nose with the back of her hand. "Did you ever see it fail? Your nose always itches most when you've got your hands covered with flour—or stove polish. Reef's comin' out for supper, did you know?"

Elsa had begun to notice of late that her mother was always flustered at the prospect of seeing Reef. She seemed happy enough at seeing Elsa, but there was a difference. Elsa had left them, had married incomprehensibly, had gone beyond their ken. She had taken herself out of their world.

"I didn't know—but I supposed he'd be out," she replied absently. "You'll all be over tonight, of course?"

Her mother folded her hands and stared at her. “Then they had to go an’ tell you—after them warnin’ me not to say a word to you about it!”

Elsa laughed. “Don’t be silly, Ma! Surprise parties never surprise anybody. Hildreth told Bayliss about it yesterday.”

Her mother turned away and began placing the bulbous shapes into the waiting pans. “Of course,” she said after a moment of silence, “you might know she’d tell it. Them that had to bring you up haven’t much say in it any more. But that’s the way of things, I s’pose. I expect we won’t have Reef to ourselves much more, either—though I’m not complainin’. Clarice is a good girl.”

She sighed, but Elsa knew that the sigh had little dolor in it. It was her mother’s old habit—her happiest moments brought sighs, if not tears, to cover her excitement.

“Has Clarice been over lately?” Elsa asked.

“She comes over when Reef is home—or he goes over there. Reef’s bringin’ her over for supper tonight—though I do hope they won’t bring Lily and Axel along. It makes so many at the table—and I didn’t get time to clean the stove. What’s more, I’ll be too tired to have them—runnin’ in and out of the kitchen—and washin’ up after. Though Clarice is a good hand at helpin’—I’ll say that for her. But it ain’t likely they’ll bring Lily and Axel along. Lily’s not feelin’ any too well these days. I guess you knew she was expectin’?”

Elsa got up suddenly, feeling uncomfortably hot in the warm odors of the kitchen. She went and stood before the screen door and watched two thick, sluggish flies, dullards of Indian summer, creep slowly up the screen. Lily Fletcher was *expecting*—God of all the crazy universe, what sardonic humor in the homely phrase!

Her mother closed the oven door noisily. “My! It certainly is hot for October! I always feel it more when it comes unnatural like this. When there ain’t any earthly reason for it *to* be warm. And no shade left, either, much. You’d better go on out and bring Lenny in. I’m all through here now except to red myself up. Pa’ll be in for his dinner before I know where I am. I don’t know *where* the time goes to!”

“I’ll set the table,” Elsa said, checking the impulse to escape from the sound of her mother’s amiable lamenting. “We can call to Lenny when it’s time.”

“All right, then. Oh, I didn’t tell you Lenny had a letter from Joe Tracy!”

Elsa hurried into the other room to hide her sudden confusion. “Yes? What did he say?” she asked as she passed through the doorway.

“Not much. He’s on the ranch in South Dakota. Talks cheerful enough. He wanted to be remembered to you.”

“That’s nice,” Elsa said aloud.

“Ye-es.” Her mother sighed heavily. “I always *did* like Joe. He seemed almost like one of our own.”

Elsa did not reply. She hurried about the task of setting the table, hoping her father and Lenny would come in before her mother could find time for more talking. As she moved about her work a spirit of rebellion smoldered deep within her. She could not help knowing what was in her mother’s mind—what had been there for weeks now, although she had never expressed it openly. Elsa had gone over to the Carews, she was already one of the Carew women. What good would it do to protest? Her mother never would understand.

She was glad when her father came at last and plied her with questions about the new house on the Mountain, and the horses Bayliss had bought in Hurley last week, and how many of his prize Holsteins Seth Carew was going to keep through the winter, and what was all this excitement in town about Nellie’s brother striking it rich down in Texas? Steve Bowers wanted to know if a man like himself, now, couldn’t put a little money into a company like that and make himself comfortable, perhaps, in two or three years. The Carews were putting money into it, Michael especially, and Mahlon Breen. There’d be some others in it, too. There was money to be made—a lot of it—and easier ways of making it than spending your days on a farm.

Elsa’s spirit revived under her father’s chatter. She rallied him on his sudden desire to get a lot of money without working for it, pleased him mightily when she told him that the land on the Mountain was the most picturesque building spot in the district, teased him a little about how bald he had become in the last three months, and rode away at last after she had urged them all—against her mother’s complaining—to get the work done early so as not to come late to the party.

Instead of returning by way of the old trail through the Bowers farm, she followed the road that led eastward to Fanny Ipsmiller’s corner, then ran southward past Nate Brazell’s place and dipped into the Hollow. It was a day that tempted one to linger in familiar ways, bringing back half-forgotten

memories, glimpsing new moods in the yellowing grass and the tall reeds that grew close to the swollen ditches on either side of the road. From every side came the discordant clamor of wild duck feeding in the rice. Along the slough's edge to the eastward, nearly half a mile away, two hunters moved slowly among the reeds, their heads and shoulders showing black against the autumn yellow, their gunbarrels glinting in the sun. From their hiding place just off the road, a flock of mallards rose suddenly with a great rushing sound, beat their way upward against the light breeze, then circled and took their way eastward in a hurried straggling line. Elsa sat in her saddle and watched them until they were almost out of sight. When she turned her eyes to the road again she saw a movement among the reeds a short distance ahead and a moment later the huge figure of Nate Brazell emerged and clambered up till he stood directly before her.

Elsa had always thought of Nate Brazell with cold fear at her heart. Now, however, she rode toward him with stubborn resolve to conceal her feelings. She smiled a greeting as she came to where he stood and would have ridden past him with no failing of her courage had he not put out his hand and seized the bridle, letting the gun he carried slip down into the crook of his elbow.

“You ain't been up talkin' to my woman, have you?” he asked gruffly.

“No—no, Nate,” Elsa replied with a feeling that her voice was suddenly leaving her. “I've been over—over home. I'm just going back to——”

His ugly laugh interrupted her. “I don't want to know where you been—nor where you're goin'. Just so you keep away from there. An' you listen to me! You keep that han'some man o' yours to home, see? He comes down this way more'n he ought. No foolin' roun' my woman no more, y'understand? She's my wife now—she ain't for no Carew dog while I've got her, see? You can tell him Nate Brazell said so, if you want. Now—get to hell out o' the way!”

He took his hand from the bridle and stepped aside. Elsa rode off, afraid to glance behind her until she had reached the farther side of the Hollow and had started up the slope that led to the Mountain. When she turned at last and looked back, Nate Brazell had vanished.

She rode home at a gallop, praying that Bayliss would not have come back from town before she reached the house. She had need to be alone for a while, to still the gaunt fear that was stirring within her. Above all, Bayliss must not know that she had seen Nate Brazell.

CHAPTER XVI

In the early evening, an unexpected threat of more rain gave Elsa the hope that perhaps only a very few might venture to come out, after all. She expressed the hope to Bayliss and Hildreth Carew while they were eating a light supper together after they had made everything ready for the evening. Bayliss merely smiled and shook his head slowly but Hildreth laughed scornfully.

“Tut, tut!” she said and bent toward Elsa with a merry glitter that made her look almost unhuman, like some extravagant, wild spirit in an aging body, Elsa thought. “How very young you are, my child! Haven’t you found out yet how far one’s friends will go to satisfy their curiosity? You remember how curious they all were three months ago when you ran off and married a Carew. Don’t you suppose they’re more curious than ever now? You’re a Carew woman now, my dear—you’ll have to get used to such things.”

Elsa glanced quickly at Bayliss, but his eyes were on his plate. Some day, she thought to herself, she would have the courage to tell Hildreth that she was not a Carew woman—that she was Elsa Bowers, of Elder’s Hollow, whatever the world about her might think.

She had put on a simple dark serge gown which she had worn in the Hollow school the spring before, and had stepped out into the living-room when she heard the first distant sound of the arriving company. Bayliss was standing beside the fireplace, his pipe in his mouth, dressed in an old tweed suit and a flannel shirt. She looked at him blankly. Beneath his humorous grimace as he inclined his head in the direction of the increasing din outside, she thought his face looked haggard.

“We’d better go to the door,” he said. “Shall we go together?” His voice sounded tired.

“Yes,” Elsa said, with a slight faintness, “let’s go together.”

Bayliss opened the door and Elsa stepped out ahead of him. Immediately they were surrounded by jostling, eager figures, shouting, laughing, calling, storming the doorway where Elsa stood beside Bayliss. They retreated within the house, the crowd pouring in after them. Every one seemed to be shouting at once: “Ch’ivari! Ch’ivari!” “Oh, you newlyweds!” “Hello, Elsa,

old girl!" "Missus Carew! Missus Carew!" "Hey, there, Bay! How's the boy!"

The house was more than full now. People seemed to be crowding the very walls. Wraps were being flung off and tossed here and there, filling the room with the fresh, damp smell of night. "Elsa, Elsa!" There was Clarice Fletcher, her hair bright under the light that fell from the wrought-iron lamp swinging from the beam above her. Reef was beside her, his arm surreptitiously about her waist. And there was Leon, waving his hand to her above the crowd, looking a little self-conscious and ill at ease. The Magnusson girls—there they were in new dresses—and behind them, Michael Carew and Nellie, with Nellie's mother between them. Fanny Ipsmiller, hideously radiant in a violet dress, with her hair in a crimped bang—Good heavens, was she dyeing it?—Fanny, big and raw-boned and smiling determinedly—and young Nels Lundquist, with a girl from the Scandinavian settlement east of Sundower!

Elsa heard herself, as through the baffling confusion of a dream, greeting one after another of her guests with a sparkling delight that made her mind feel raw. Bayliss was playing up handsomely, she thought—he could not have chosen better clothes for the occasion—comfortable, homely, contented tweeds.

The living-room and dining-room and the hall between were hurriedly cleared for dancing. Elsa caught a glimpse of some one thrusting a large package into the closet under the stairway . . . that would be the eight-day clock, she thought . . . some one would make a speech later and present it when the refreshments were brought in. Now Johnny Johnson and the Whitney boys were seated beside the piano . . . tuning up a banjo—rippling over the keys of an accordion—tapping lightly on a snare-drum; and Annabel Murphy, daughter of the school superintendent in Sundower, was at the piano, "giving the key," gliding over a scale or two while she waited, flexing her wrists and looking about her with something of an air.

Elsa found her mother and father and Uncle Fred sitting sedately in a corner with Hildreth Carew, who was very evidently doing her best to put them at their ease. As the music started for the first dance, Fanny Ipsmiller came through the crowd and took Elsa's mother and Hildreth to the kitchen, where they would spend most of the evening getting sandwiches and cakes cut and brewing the coffee. Elsa waited until they had gone, then spirited her father and Uncle Fred upstairs to a room where they could play pinochle without fear of being disturbed until it was time to go home.

Passing the open doorway to her own bedroom, where a number of women had gone to remove their wraps, and where a group still lingered after the younger women had gone downstairs, Elsa heard her name called and thrust her head into the room. Mrs. Block, Nellie's mother, was there, a rotund, breathless woman who wore on her breast, just below her left shoulder, a gold medal she had won years ago in an elocution contest that had been held by the Hurley W. C. T. U. Her face glowed benignly, Elsa thought, even though her eyes did have a way of darting here and there in constant, alert search. She had taken one of the small doilies from Elsa's dressing table and was holding it in her hands.

"We were all wondering," she said as Elsa stepped into the room, "whether you had done this lovely work yourself, Elsa. Girls don't take to fancy work now like they used to."

Elsa laughed. "Indeed I didn't do it! I couldn't sew a straight seam. That's my mother's work."

"No, girls don't make such a fuss nowadays about getting married," Mrs. Block panted, laying the doily aside and fanning herself with her handkerchief. She leaned back heavily in the low chair on which she sat, and looked at Elsa with a certain devouring intentness that brought the color to Elsa's cheeks. "My land, the stacks of things I had when I got married! I have some of them left yet. I declare, but it's warm for this time of year!"

"We might have a little fresh air," Elsa suggested, stepping to the window and throwing it open.

"I think it must be these corsets of mine," Mrs. Block went on. "I never wear them round the house and I haven't been out anywhere for so long that I have to break them in all over again. But that's what we women have to pay for having children—though I always say I'd do just the same thing if I had my life to live over again. Children are a blessing in any home. But you'll know all about that yourself—and soon enough, Elsa. My land, when I was your age a man could make his hands meet round my waist."

"I guess a man *did!*" That was Mrs. George Shields, secretary of the local Red Cross and a ruling spirit in the Ladies' Aid Society. She laughed with much restraint, discreetly, her long upper lip drawn down over her teeth, her curved eyebrows lifted. Steve Bowers had once sent them into gales of laughter at the table with an imitation of Mrs. Shields laughing at some of her own jokes.

“Now, none of that, Bertha Shields,” Mrs. Block protested, with a glance upward at Elsa. “But then—you’ll have to get used to Bertha, Elsa. She must have her joke—when there are no young girls around, of course.”

“I think you’ve got the cunningest house, Elsa,” Mrs. Walter Magnusson said. “You certainly *are* the lucky girl! My goodness—of course, I have no complaint to make—but if I could have floors like these in my house! I always say that hardwood floors save you half your work. They just look out for themselves.”

“But Bay will be getting you a maid, now that you’re all settled in your new place, of course,” Mrs. Block observed, a little boldly, perhaps, though she was the mother-in-law of Michael Carew.

Elsa felt a flush creep into her cheeks, but managed to smile with her reply. “I really prefer to do my own work. I’m afraid I’d find time hanging on my hands if I didn’t have something to occupy my mind.”

“And then, too,” Bertha Shields remarked in her confidential manner, “I think it’s nicer to be alone for a while when you’re first married. I was—with my husband, of course. It’s sweeter—more intimate, don’t you think? Nobody to see you having your little tiffs—or making up afterwards, don’t you know? Besides—men are men, God bless ’em!”

Again she laughed, a clucking, guarded sound, and this time the other women laughed too. Mrs. Block, however, sighed placidly. “Indeed they are—even the best of them! As Elsa knows by this time. Three months already, isn’t it, Elsa—since?”

Elsa smiled, desperately. “Three months ago today.” She felt suddenly smothered in the lugubrious common knowledge in which these women enclosed her with themselves. She had been made one of a company whose sole bond seemed to be some vague, indefinable grievance that eluded expression. She must get out of the room at once.

“I’ll have to run down now and see how things are going,” she announced quickly. “They’ll think I’ve run off and deserted them. Won’t you all come down and dance, too?”

At the foot of the stairs Bayliss caught her and swung her out upon the floor. She tossed her head and looked up at him, smiling, but between them there seemed to be a thick mist, so that she could not see his eyes. She felt again, as she had felt when she had danced with Bayliss on that memorable night three months ago, that all eyes in the room were upon them, following closely, inquiringly, insatiably curious. A sudden hush seemed to have fallen

upon them all. She glanced quickly up into Bayliss' face. He was smiling down at her, understandingly. She remembered then what he had said at the supper table the night before. . . . "Try to be game about it . . . and then forget it as soon as it's over." And now—was he simply being game—and was it as hard for him as it was for her? But he had not been up in the room there, listening to Nellie Block's mother—and Bertha Shields.

All at once a shout of laughter went up from the dancers and Elsa was aware of a rope tightening about her shoulders. It took her a moment to realize that some one had tossed a lariat about her and Bayliss and was drawing it close so that they were pressed together, their arms bound at their sides.

"Do your duty, Bay Carew!"

Elsa looked around to find the youngest of the Whitney boys standing beside her, one end of the rope in his hands.

Half a dozen voices spoke up at once. "Come on, Bayliss!" "Let's have a close-up, Elsa!" "Real movie stuff—and make it a fade-out!" "Hurry up—we want to dance!" "You won't get loose till you do!" The boisterous cries rang in Elsa's ears, set up a clamor in her heart. She heard Bayliss laugh aloud, felt his arms close about her as he drew her up to him—then felt his lips roughly against hers. Cheers rose, feet stamped the floor in hearty approval, the rope fell away and dropped to the floor, the music broke forth wildly, every one was dancing again, and Elsa moved with Bayliss into the dance once more. When they were in the hall, Bayliss spoke in a low tone, his voice almost expressionless: "You'd better get away from this damned racket! You've had as much as you can stand of it now. Slip out into the kitchen with Hildreth and your mother. I'll stay here and keep things moving along."

It was long past midnight before the first of the guests left for home. At two o'clock the last vehicle had rumbled its way out of the yard. Elsa turned back into the house and flung herself upon the couch where it had been moved against the wall to make room for the dancers. She closed her eyes in an unutterable weariness. Presently she heard Bayliss come in, heard him walk slowly across the floor and stand before the mantelpiece, felt him looking down at her.

"Get to bed, Elsa," he said quietly. "You look all in, if I know anything about it." She opened her eyes and raised them slowly to his face. "I'm sorry for what happened tonight," he went on. "I promised I wouldn't. But under the circumstances, there didn't seem to be any other way out of it."

If he only would not look at her with those frowning dark brows, Elsa thought, like minnows darting together, perhaps she might speak. She saw him thrust his hands down into his pockets, saw his head stiffen on his shoulders, saw the sudden dark scowl that clouded his face. Then she closed her eyes again. Soon she heard him walk into the hall where he paused for a moment, silent. Presently she heard the door open and close, and she knew she was alone.

She got up after a moment, when he did not come back. In the hall she found that he had put on his hat. She threw a scarf about her shoulders, stepped out quickly, and stood before the door in the darkness.

She looked down to where the shack stood on the slope below. There was no light there, as there had been last night. Gorham was asleep. She hurried to the side of the house and looked upward along the pathway that led to the clump of birches standing white in the starlight on the side of the hill. She called softly and stood listening. When no reply came, she turned back and went into the house.

She undressed slowly and lay for a long time staring into the darkness, listening for him, quaking at every sound in the still house. The house was full of fear and vacancy, a stark, unhappy thing. Her body ached as though she had been through some physical torture. Bay . . . Bayliss . . . Carew . . . his name would come in fragments to her lips. She lived over and over the destroying memory of his kiss—that kiss he had given her on that night in summer, an age ago, when they had quarreled because of Lily Fletcher—and now this kiss he had given her because there was no other way out of it, as he had said. Had her body turned to stone, then, under the cold tyranny of her mind?

After an endless time she heard the outer door at the back of the house open and her heart stopped to listen to his walk across the kitchen floor—through the dining-room and into the hall—and then his brief pause there. Now he was coming up the stairs—coming quietly along the hall, approaching her own door. He had paused, wondering, probably, if she were asleep. Oh, Bayliss Carew! In that instant life stopped for Elsa, went out in momentary oblivion. She heard his step again, passing along the hall to his own room. The blood pounded back into her heart, crushing out her breath. Hunger renewed its gnawing in the depths of her body. Bayliss . . . Bayliss Carew!

CHAPTER XVII

The next morning was a brilliant wash of pure light from a sky like a translucent gem. Bayliss left shortly after breakfast for Hurley, and Elsa, watching him drive away into the cool and tremulous blue that lay over the west fields, was overcome with loneliness. A few hours later, when her work was done for the day, she took Fleta and rode southward to the Carews' to visit Hildreth.

As she rode through the avenue of elms she saw that the lawn about the Carew house was still green and fresh, but that Hildreth's garden, farther away, was a drab and blackened waste. But there was Hildreth herself with a woolen shawl about her shoulders, moving serenely down the garden walk to meet her. Elsa gave her horse into the care of one of the men and went toward the garden.

"I saw you coming, my dear," Hildreth greeted her. "I thought you'd find the house stuffy on a day like this. I need the air myself. Let's walk through the garden and down to the pond."

Hildreth slipped her long hand through Elsa's arm, and it seemed as though she leaned toward her a little wearily as she walked.

"It's such a gorgeous day," Elsa said. "I just couldn't resist a little gallop with Fleta."

"I'm glad you came. I live to myself—always have—too much, maybe. I get on with myself better than I do with most of the people I meet. But there are days when being alone isn't all it should be. I guess I'm getting to be an old woman, my dear."

She sighed and stooped to pick a shrunken aster from a leaf-strewn bed at her feet.

"You're too tired after last night," Elsa said. "You and mother did nearly all the work."

"No, no, child," Hildreth protested. "What's an old maid for, if not to do the dirty work? No—it's not that."

"Then—there *is* something," Elsa said quickly.

“Sooner or later, my child,” Hildreth went on, “you are going to learn that this business of being a Carew is a little too much. I’m just tired of it today—wary of it.”

Elsa looked at her. Where now was that wild spirit that had shone in her eyes last night? She laid a hand affectionately over the thin, brittle fingers that clung to her arm.

“Tut, tut!” Hildreth broke forth abruptly. “It doesn’t affect you.” She glanced quickly behind her toward the house, as if to assure herself that they were alone. “There was a scene after Michael and Nellie got back here last night. It seems Michael left the party last night and didn’t turn up again for half an hour or more. Nellie says he wasn’t alone, and I’m ready to believe her. Michael refused to give any account of where he had been—refused to talk about it. This morning Nellie got the children together and left—went back to her mother.”

“They’re gone?” Elsa asked in amazement.

“Left right after breakfast, Nellie and the two younger children. Little Mickey is here—you should have seen him! He is a beautiful child, anyhow, with that curly mop of hair—a born Carew, God help him!—and he stood up in front of Nellie with his arms folded and threw back his head. ‘I’m not going Mother,’ he said. ‘I don’t like the Blocks—they’re common!’ Can you imagine that? Nellie—she’s a soft-hearted fool, anyhow—burst into tears. But she left, just the same, without Mickey. She left cursing the house—her life wasn’t her own—and her husband wasn’t her own—and now her children weren’t her own—and a lot more in the same line.”

“And—you think she’ll stay?” Elsa asked.

“Pht! She’ll be back. Give her a couple of days—three at the most. She’s done it before—twice. But she came back. They always do. You see, my dear, the Carew women have a way of falling in love with their men. Once that happens—there’s no hope for them—the women, I mean.” She turned her colorless face upon Elsa and for a moment the old fires leaped in her eyes. “I hope you will have better sense than to fall in love with Bayliss Carew,” she observed dryly.

Elsa turned her face away to hide her confusion. “Is there no such thing as—as falling in love without—” she began uncertainly, but Hildreth interrupted her.

“Without living to regret it? Perhaps—some women have, my dear—but they didn’t marry Carews.”

They were passing over the winding walk between the piteous rows of flower beds. Elsa recalled that other hour she had spent with Hildreth here in the summer when the ground had been a riot of bloom. In the woman's mood, it seemed now, was the reflection of all that gay change.

"I guess I'm just getting too old to cope with it," Hildreth went on. "It all tires me—I have no fight left in me. There was a time when I would have tried to smooth things over—for the sake of the family. Now—I don't care much whether Nellie comes back or not. She will, of course."

They walked down the little slope toward the pond, where a great clatter had been sent up by the lawful tenants of the region upon the arrival of a couple of stray wild ducks. Above the pond a little delicate herringbone of white cloud hovered remote, and on the farther bank flecks of gold and crimson still broidered the grove. Always, Elsa thought, a sense of richness and well-being and calm lay upon the possessions of the Carews, and yet, in the great house back there—the dark of infidelities and jealousies and discords.

"I have come to the place in life where all I ask for is peace," Hildreth continued. "I don't seem to be able to worry about things any more. There's this new scheme of theirs in Texas, now. Michael thinks it will make him a millionaire. Perhaps it will. Perhaps they are simply riding to another fall. I don't know which it will be. I don't believe I care. Michael says they are going to let others come into it with their money. It seems he was talking it over last night with the Whitney boys and the Magnussons. Even poor old Fanny Ipsmiller was asking me to tell her all about it. Mahlon Breen is coming out tonight to talk it over with Michael and Seth. I told them this morning they were going too far. But Michael only grinned and said he was doing any one a favor by letting him come in on the scheme. And then, somehow, I lost interest in it. I'm done for, I guess."

Elsa looked down over the pond and pressed her lips together. She felt herself in the grip of some evil foreboding. What right had Michael Carew and Mahlon Breen to bring the people of the Hollow into the tangle of their affairs? It was damnable—damnable whether the thing was a success or a failure in the end! But Hildreth was talking again.

"I sometimes think I lost my love for a good fight when Peter died. We don't always know how much a thing affects us at the time."

"Is Grace any better?" Elsa asked. "Bayliss was saying she hasn't been well."

Hildreth shook her head. “Grace isn’t going to get any better. She says she has gone mystic. She’s going mad, if she isn’t mad already. She has visions of Peter—talks to him sometimes when we’re all in the room with her. Lately she has grown suspicious of us. I heard her only yesterday complaining to Peter of our treatment of her. If she’d had children of her own, she might have been different. She blames Peter for that, too. Oh, dear—I don’t know—I just don’t know. . . . Let’s go back, my dear.”

Her voice had become gray and toneless. As she turned to go back to the house she leaned heavily on Elsa’s arm, and Elsa, glancing at her with anxiety, saw that her eyes were closed and the lids dark and drawn.

“I wish you could come over and stay with us for a few days,” Elsa suggested. “You need a little change and a good rest.”

“Don’t pay any attention to me today, child,” Hildreth replied. “It’s been good to have you to talk to. Do you think it’s warm enough for us to eat a little lunch on the veranda? The house smothers me today.”

“Of course. It’s like summer.”

“Come, then, and let’s find something to eat and I’ll try to be a little more cheerful. I ought to be ashamed of myself, on a day like this, carrying on this way. I’m just a whimpering old maid. If I had a man, now, who wasn’t true to me—or something really to worry about—I’d feel better, I know I would.”

Poor Hildreth Carew, Elsa thought as they made their way together along the path among the ruined flower beds, turning her back at last upon the fight, seeking only peace now, willing after all to let life take its way without her.

Late that same evening, Axel Fosberg’s house burned to the ground. Elsa and Bayliss had climbed to the top of the Mountain and had looked northward across the Hollow, eerie and black, and full now of the grotesque goblins of dwarf-oaks and squat willow trees playing at strange unearthly charades in the thickening dusk. Thinking of it later, it seemed strange to Elsa that they had not seen it at once—that lurid smear of flame on the darkened prairie beyond the Hollow.

“It must be Axel Fosberg’s new house,” Bayliss said. “It can’t be anything else.”

Elsa felt rooted to the ground. Her teeth began to chatter, uncontrollably, and Bayliss put his arm about her shoulders. "You're cold," he said brusquely. "Get down to the house. I'll run ahead and telephone to Sundower. There may be something we can do."

By the time Elsa had reached the house, Bayliss had the car out and was calling to Gorham, who had gone off into the fields somewhere to the southward at sundown. When he got no response, he drove the car to where Elsa was standing before the doorway of the house. He paused long enough to tell her—it was Axel's new house—all but gone now—they were hoping to save the barn, though, and the sheds—the neighbors were helping—he would be back as soon as he could come—in the meantime, Gorham would be in any minute. Then he was gone and Elsa stood stiffly watching the car as it shot into the road, turned northward, and vanished into the Hollow.

Poor Axel Fosberg, who had slaved for a year, hoarding every penny to build this house for Lily Fletcher! What would he do now? What could Bayliss do for him? What could all those neighbors down there do for a man whom Fate had chosen to be the victim of her gross jokes—the grosser one of which he had yet to learn? Tears started to Elsa's eyes as she turned away slowly and went into the house.

She had made a fire in the living-room and had drawn a chair under the lamp where she could sit and read while she waited for Bayliss to come back, when she was startled by a half-timid, half-peremptory knock at the outer door. She went to the door and opened it upon a figure standing dimly back among the shadows. A voice spoke softly.

"I am sorry—I bother you."

Elsa recognized at once the voice of Zenka, Nate Brazell's wife. There was a liquid music in it that distinguished it from any other voice she had ever heard.

"Why—Zenka! Come on in. You don't bother me at all. I'm all alone."

The girl came into the hall and followed Elsa into the living-room, looking about her with slow, slanting, distrustful eyes, one hand grasping her bright shawl close to her breast.

"Come—sit down, Zenka," Elsa said.

Zenka seated herself with an odd sliding motion upon the chair that Elsa offered her. She wore no hat and her hair was wound in great black coils over her ears. Elsa thought with a confusion of feeling that she was by far the most beautiful creature she had ever seen.

“I should not come. I am ’fraid I trouble you too much,” Zenka protested again.

“No, no, Zenka. I was going to make myself some coffee. You can help me drink it now. Bayliss is away—you saw the fire?”

“Yes—yes—terrible! It make me ’fraid, too!”

“Did Nate go over?”

“Heem? No. He is north—shooting duck. He come back again tomorrow.”

Elsa started for the kitchen. “Just a minute, Zenka, while I put the coffee on,” she said. “Or perhaps you’d rather have a cup of cocoa?”

Zenka appeared not to have heard. Her eyes were fastened ardently upon a vase of richly colored pottery which stood on the piano. Absently she said, “Yes, ma’am, please.”

In the kitchen, Elsa wondered what had brought the girl wandering up alone out of the Hollow to come knocking at her door at such a time. Had she hoped to find Bayliss? Elsa set her lips obstinately against their nervous quiver and thrust the ugly thought back in her mind. Whatever the possibilities inherent in the romantic Carews, she was not going to permit her feelings to become so grossly involved as to think that Bayliss still thought of Zenka Wolf—the girl from south of Hurley! And yet—had she not sat and listened to Nate Brazell’s threats? She lifted her head proudly, with a wave of anger at herself for permitting such a fear to weigh upon her.

Back in the living-room, Elsa found Zenka seated where she had left her, her head thrown back against the chair, her feet curled beneath her. As Elsa entered, the girl made a quick movement and took a posture that was stiffly decorous. The act was so obvious that Elsa could scarcely restrain a smile, although it annoyed her in spite of herself. She set down the tray with the cocoa and frosted cakes beside Zenka on a small table, then went and seated herself on the couch.

“Aren’t you afraid to come out alone, so far, Zenka?” Elsa asked the girl.

“Me—I am not ’fraid. I am ’fraid of one thing—I am ’fraid of heem. I am running away from heem!” She indicated with a flutter of her expressive fingers the direction of Nate Brazell’s farm. “I cannot *stand* heem, any longer!” She gave a spasmodic jerk to her body. “I go to my father again—or some place—away from heem.” Both hands flew out aimlessly and her vermilion and sapphire and yellow shawl fell down about her waist. Beneath

it she had on a thin cotton dress, faded and threadbare. “So I come to ask you—will you give me a coat—old coat that you don’t wear now—for my shawl? This, people will see from far away—and maybe they will tell Nate if they meet heem.”

“You mean—you are going away tonight?” Elsa asked. “You are not going back?”

“Tonight—why not? He is not home now. He would not know. Tomorrow he would stop me.”

Elsa looked at the shawl, at Zenka’s rapt, wide-eyed face. “But—why do you want to go away, Zenka?” she asked. “Has he been unkind to you?”

The girl made a grimace. “Ugh! He makes me s-sick!” Her breath came in a sharp hiss, her hands clenched at her breast. “You do not know heem. He is like a dog—just like a dog. He goes down on his knees—and look up at me—so! Tch! He is a pig! Every day I wash myself—clean—all over. But he—he is like a pig. He is no man. Tch! Yesterday I throw a kettle on heem. Then he cry—ugh! He makes me s-sick! I go away from heem.”

“Then—he doesn’t abuse you—he doesn’t hurt you, Zenka?”

“Heem! I guess *not*! He would not dare to hurt me.” Her eyes flashed and she set her lips in a proud pout. In the next moment she was looking about the room in a sidelong glance of admiration and envy. Her eyes came back at last and moved in a similar way over Elsa’s body. Elsa had the disquieting feeling of being close to something strange and elemental and violent. She felt a faint warmth flow over her at the girl’s gaze.

“What will your father say if you go back to live at home?” Elsa asked.

For a moment Zenka did not reply. She stared about her as if she had not heard the question. Finally she spoke, almost in a whisper. “My father—I guess he nearly kill me.”

“And your friends?”

Zenka laughed suddenly. “Ha! My friends will laugh at me—call me the big fool! But maybe I don’t go back there—to my father and my people. They do not know *heem*! I have not told them.”

“Where will you go then?” Elsa argued. “At least Nate does not hurt you. So many husbands would not treat you kindly at all.”

“I do not care for that. If I had a husband I love—if he beat me—well, anyhow I love him, eh? Now I have a husband—he gives me a pain—he

makes me sick—I never love heem—well, I go away.”

For nearly an hour they talked together, at the end of which time Elsa found herself almost pleading with Zenka to go back and try to be a good wife to Nate Brazell. To all her entreaties, however, Zenka responded with an elemental logic, sometimes violent, sometimes cool and detached, but always stubbornly willful. She did not love Nate Brazell—she could not live with him and be his wife. She would return to his house tonight, but on another night she would go away forever.

When Zenka left at last, Elsa went with her as far as the road. A moon had risen and in the soft glow Zenka was a charmed figure out of extravagant romance. She swept the vivid shawl about her sinuous body with all the grace of a gypsy dancing-girl. Elsa, regarding her obliquely as they made their way toward the roadway, saw in her a contradicting restiveness and placidity. She was like a suave, half-domesticated animal. In her misty, dark look, Elsa felt that there lurked a subtle contempt for her, who was the wife of Bayliss Carew. It almost seemed as though Zenka with some instinct uncommon and obscure, responsive to the very essence of existence, sensed the nature of her relationship with Bayliss—perhaps despised her for it. Elsa hated herself for the thought.

For “good-by” Zenka spoke some lilting word in her own tongue, which Elsa only half heard. Then she was gone, a strange figure at once shy and bold, slipping through the moonlight down into the Hollow.

Elsa stood in the roadway watching her until she was out of sight. She was about to turn back to the house again when she saw in the distance the gleaming headlights of Bayliss’s car bobbing over the uneven ground on the farther side of the Hollow. She took an involuntary step or two forward, a sharp thrill racing over her body. She would run down the road and meet him before he came up out of the Hollow.

A little way along the road she halted abruptly. What was Bayliss doing? The car had stopped. Now it was backing up—turning around. Zenka, of course. He had met the girl and was taking her back to Nate Brazell. It was only natural that he should do so. Why . . . of course . . . he would have to take her back. . . .

Elsa caught at her heart. She had been running, without any control of her limbs, and now her knees were shaking under her, her arms were lifeless at her sides, her breath sobbed out dryly. What was happening to her? She caught herself up, like some one mad returning suddenly to sanity . . . Gertie Schwartz, of long ago in Iowa. . . . She turned and walked back steadily up

the hill, her stiff fingers pressed together, one hand within the other. A cascade of moonlight glided down over the Mountain and everything about her looked like dim spray, the whitening grass, the brushwood in the ravine, the white birches.

CHAPTER XVIII

In the air now was the wine of Indian Summer, golden, heady, lavishly spilled.

From the top of the Mountain, Elsa could look down across the Hollow and beyond, to where Axel Fosberg was building his new house, a mere shack that would take the place of the modestly comfortable frame house he had built there for Lily only a few months ago. Axel was toiling alone down there, toiling day after day, from the first show of dawn until the last hour of twilight, the pathetic scapegoat of an evil Fate. He was working frantically, they said, against the setting in of winter. Elsa had gone down there, only yesterday, and had spoken to him, protesting that he was overworking, but Axel had laughed, his red face growing redder with a bashful pride. "Na-ow, it's not'ing! When a fella got somet'ing to look forward til . . . he likes vork! You know how it is vit'—" He inclined his head toward the house a mile away on the Fletcher farm, where Lily was staying with her mother. "Yes, I know, Axel," Elsa had said. "I wish you every joy. I do!" And then he had rubbed the back of his neck with his large, freckled hand, and looked at her with a wistfulness that had wrung her heart. She had turned Fleta into the road then and had ridden abruptly away, her tears blurring the whole landscape before her.

From the top of the Mountain, too, Elsa could see Fanny Ipsmiller striding about the Lundquist yard, hanging patchwork quilts and bright red woolen blankets on the line to be aired. Through the still, warm pause of the air came the sharp yapping of Nate Brazell's dogs, and yonder in the pasture, a little to the eastward, the form of a girl moved behind a small herd of cattle, with a sway to her body like the motion of tawny wheat. That was Zenka! Elsa watched her, beating down a new madness that had writhed within her for days, every time she returned to the dark memory of that night of Zenka's visit. What was becoming of her, where was the pride and integrity of her mind, that she could wallow like this in the very mire of jealousy? She had argued with herself, hoping, despairing, but to no purpose. The feeling was there, a livid torch in her heart.

Westward, and a little to the north, the naked cottonwood grove on the Bowers farm made a gray lattice-work against the charmed blue of the sky. There it was that romance had come on an evening in June, ages ago it

seemed to Elsa, come and tarried until she had fled from it afraid. There had been moments since then, brief, secret moments, in which the memory of that June night had come back to her with a disturbing warmth. But even that was dead within her now. Reef had called her on the telephone only an hour ago, and told her that Joe Tracy was coming back to visit them on his way to South America. She had smiled at the news—Joe Tracy wandering the earth again, singing his songs under other skies, telling tales and making love for other ears to hear. The only thought that came to her mind was that she would have to tell Bayliss that Joe was coming to spend a few days with Reef and Leon.

In the evening, Elsa walked among the slight young birches halfway up the slope. Bayliss had told her he would join her as soon as he had spoken to Gorham about going up to Sundower, first thing in the morning, for the load of feed he had ordered that day over the telephone.

Elsa was leaning against one of the young trees when she saw Bayliss making his way up the path toward her. He came at last and threw himself down on the grassy ground at her feet. She glanced down at him there, at the strong shoulders and the bronzed neck and the unruly ridge of his hair. A sharp excitement stirred within her.

“Joe Tracy is coming back, Bay,” she told him abruptly.

He did not look up at her, but she saw his slow smile lift one corner of his mouth, arrogantly.

“So Dale Whitney was telling me this afternoon,” he observed quietly.

Elsa was silent for a moment. “Why didn’t you speak of it at supper?” she asked finally.

He glanced up at her with a bantering smile that brought the warmth into her cheeks. “I didn’t know it made so much difference,” he said.

Her head fell back and her hands met and clenched behind the slender bole of the tree. Her lashes fringed together in a narrow line as she fought for possession of herself. How easy it would be to tell him now that Joe Tracy’s name was scarcely more than a memory to her. The impulse seized her suddenly to lose herself forever to him, to become on the instant another Carew woman, taking hungrily what a Carew man chose to give her, asking nothing more. And then, like a small, bright image, the face of Zenka Brazell drifted before her eyes against the blue dusk. A Carew woman, accepting all the Zenkas through a lifetime of heartache and broken pride!

She strove to keep her voice steady as she replied. “No, Bayliss. Joe Tracy doesn’t mean anything to me now. I just wondered why you had not told me, that was all.”

Bayliss sat with his shoulders hunched forward, his hands clasped about his knees, his eyes fixed in the distance. “I’ve been thinking about that, too,” he said presently. “It wasn’t that I didn’t think of telling you at supper—it was on my mind most of the time and I almost mentioned it a half dozen times.” He was silent again, gazing off across the dusk-enfolded prairie. “The truth is, Elsa, we’re simply closing up toward each other. One of these days we’ll turn the key in the lock and there’ll be an end to it. That’s a side of this little game of ours that we didn’t see when we started out.”

“It seems to me there are a number of sides to it that we didn’t see when we started out,” Elsa suggested, a little bitterly.

But Bayliss appeared not to have heard. “Take this business of Joe Tracy, for instance,” he went on. “We’ve talked about Joe. Joe was never anything more to me than a hired hand on the farm. I don’t hold it against you that he was more than that to you. We’ve talked that all out, long ago. If things were what they might be, I’d have you invite Joe to spend a few days with us—have him come over and take supper with us, at least. We could treat him as an old flame of yours—have our little joke about it—laugh over it—and forget it. Instead of that, we don’t talk about it. Don’t you see what I mean?”

“I do,” she said, clenching her fingers until they ached.

He was on his feet suddenly, looking down at her. “The truth is, little enemy, we can’t go on like this. We’re not built that way. I’m not—and you’re not. There was a night last July—the night Lily Fletcher came to see you—when I kissed you, because I couldn’t help myself. Perhaps you have forgotten that you kissed me, too—with all your soul in it. Or perhaps you think I didn’t know it.”

She struggled to meet his look, to quiet the swift beating of her heart. In the ravine farther up the Mountain a night owl hooted dismally, and the dry grass on the slope sighed under the faint wind.

She hardened herself against the appeal in his voice. “That,” she said, scarcely above a whisper, “was only—only physical.” And although the rapierlike words seemed to be killing something in her heart, she added, “I had experienced that—before.”

She had turned her head far to one side so that she might not look at him. She could not look at him. One look at him now and it would be the end.

She could resist him no longer. But no—there were the eyes of Zenka, with their veiled brilliance, and the red, unquestioning mouth of Zenka.

His voice spoke again, unbearably gentle, reasonable. “Perhaps you will tell me, then, just why you married me, instead of Joe Tracy, Elsa.”

She felt that he was tearing the words with sheer physical effort out of the grip of his own pride. What should she tell him now? Should she tell him at last that there had never been a time when she had not loved him, that she had married him because her own blind love had driven her to him, that she loved him now with all the passion of her being, hungrily, interminably? She drew herself up against the tree, rigid, cold from head to foot.

She heard her own voice at last, as if it were the voice of a stranger, in a low murmur that was shocking to her ears. “I married you, Bayliss—because I was afraid. I was afraid that I might marry him—and become a—a farm drab on a sheep ranch in South Dakota. I thought a marriage without love—any kind of marriage—would be better than that. I had seen so much—of that.”

For a seemingly endless time he said nothing. Elsa’s spine began to ache against the birch trunk. She felt that she could not bear it another instant. Then Bayliss came so close to her that she could hear his uneven breathing. She fancied that she could hear the dull throbbing of his heart.

“Elsa,” he said coldly, “you are lying to me. There are those in the world who could do just what you say you did, but you’re not one of them. What you’re telling me is that you took me for a convenient way out of a situation. I’m telling you that you didn’t—that you couldn’t. I’m not going to say any more about it. You can’t stand it—and I can’t. Two things—two things only—have made it possible for me to stand it as long as I have. One is the fact that I’m cursed with a love for you that is simply an obsession. It’s the nearest thing to worship that I have ever known. The other is the suspicion that some damned fate has picked me to settle the account for the Carews—to even up the score for a family of men who have always got what they wanted.”

She drew in her breath sharply and raised her face to his. “Even—even the wife of Nate Brazell,” she said, sick from her inward trembling.

There—she had told him at last! Faintness crept down over her, like a deepening of the dark. She was aware that he was looking at her with a strange scrutiny, and then his sardonic laughter pierced her ears.

“God! So that’s it! Well, I don’t blame you, at that. I might tell you—but what’s the use! It would only bore you and it would sound funny as the devil to me. But I’m not quite so rotten as that—not quite. When a man worships a woman, Elsa—well, he worships her. That’s something for you to remember. But I’d rather have you hate me with all your heart than have you accept me and—and tolerate me.”

Then he was gone. She remained for a long time, leaning inert against the tree, watching his figure vanish among the shadows on the slope below. At once, the whole universe about her became a human rhythm. She felt beneath her the breathing of the great, dark lungs of the earth, the tremendous excitement of its vast heart, and above it, white stars and fair space, dreams of its mighty spirit. Life, love—dreams these, too; shadows in the wind.

She did not see Bayliss again that evening. In the morning Gorham told her that he had gone to Hurley and would not be back until dark.

She moved about the house like one who had come back a stranger to a place that had long been familiar. Bayliss had gone to Hurley, she knew, so that she might have the day to herself after their talk last night among the birches. A day for what? A day in which to dwell alone with her pride, to look about her at all the reminders of his love and his patience, to discover again the insistent yearnings which her heart held and her lips refused to speak. It was intolerable.

In the afternoon she set out on foot through the fields that lay toward the Bowers farm. She had no clear intention of visiting her mother in her present mood. She knew only that it was good to walk, to feel the firm and reassuring earth beneath her feet, to lift her face to the clean, untroubled blue of the skies. It had been so when she had lain alone in the cover of the pigweed house and gazed upward into the uncharted channels of the clouds. A mood of unaccountable happiness filled her. The world moved off, grew small, became a tiny sphere in space, its ponderous contours dimmed by distance, its petty conflicts gone from sight. A feeling of shame possessed her. Where now was her pride, her jealousy, her little questionings and conceits? Where now was anything but love, flaming, absorbing, ecstatic?

The mood persisted with her when she finally came into the kitchen where her mother was preparing supper. It lifted her beyond the round of dull complaining, shed its warmth upon the mean routine that enveloped the lives of Steve Bowers and Uncle Fred, and when she started back once more

across the fields, cast its silver hue upon the mist that lay over the Hollow, web whitening upon web.

Where the ground lifted from the level prairie to the first gentle slope of the Mountain, she paused and looked up toward the buildings nestling against the side of the hill. There was a light there. Her first thought was of Gorham. Then she remembered that he had told her at noon that he was going north to visit a cousin on the other side of Sundower. It could not be Gorham's light. Bayliss had come home, then. Her heart quickened as she started up the slope.

It was not until she had reached the pathway leading from the barns to the house that an inexplicable feeling of uneasiness suddenly assailed her. She moved up the pathway slowly, opened the door, and stepped into the hall. Closing the door softly behind her, she stood for a moment with her hand upon the knob and looked into the living-room. Bayliss had started a fire and was standing before it, his feet wide apart, his hands behind him.

He turned quickly and looked toward her. "Hello, Else!" he called. "I was just going to look for you."

"I was over at Mother's," she explained. "I had no idea you would be home so early."

She took off her hat and pushed back her hair. Her forehead was wet. Then she stepped into the living-room. "Gorham told me—" She felt the breath gather cruelly in her throat. Zenka Brazell, curled daintily in one of the big chairs, was uncoiling herself with slow deliberation, drawing herself up with a disarming, childish smile.

"I come here again," the girl said in that soft voice of hers that had been a burning memory in Elsa's heart for days. "I was very lonely—so I come to see you. Maybe I trouble you? You don't care?"

"Why, certainly not, Zenka!" Elsa said. Her voice sounded curiously hollow, flutelike.

She glanced at Bayliss again and realized that he must have just come in. He had not yet taken off his light overcoat. She did not dare to look at his face. "Did you have supper in Hurley, Bayliss?" she asked. But she could not wait to hear his answer. Her entire body had been seized with trembling. Almost running, she made her way blindly to the kitchen. She closed the door behind her and stood in the middle of the floor, crushing her clenched hands to her temples, struggling frantically to control herself. Bayliss was coming through the dining-room. She turned as he flung the door open.

“What’s the matter?” he demanded, closing the door behind him and stepping toward her. She felt his fingers close upon her shoulders, cutting into the flesh. “What’s the matter with you? You’re as white as paper.”

“Nothing—nothing,” she heard herself mutter from lips that no longer seemed a part of her. “I’m—I suppose I’m a—a little tired.”

Without looking at him she felt his long, deep scrutiny. “Stop this!” he commanded finally. “You’re acting like a fool! I know what’s the matter. I’ve been back less than ten minutes. I found her sitting on the doorstep when I came. Nate’s been away since yesterday afternoon—drunk—in Sundowner. She’s afraid to meet him when he comes home.”

“I don’t care—I don’t care!” she protested.

His fingers pressed deep into her shoulders. “I do care! You’ve got to listen to me! She wants to stay here tonight. I told her she couldn’t stay. I told her she must not come here again. She’s going to stay with Fanny Ipsmiller tonight. I’ll take her as far as Brazell’s pasture and she can go the rest of the way herself. But she’s going to walk. Do you hear me?”

“Yes, yes—I hear you! It doesn’t matter.”

Without another word he stepped back from her, opened the door, and went into the dining-room. A moment later she heard him call to Zenka from the hall. She heard the obedient, low inflection of the girl’s voice. Presently the outer door opened—and closed. Elsa sank down upon a chair.

She did not know how long she had been sitting there, on the edge of the chair, waiting. When she rose at last and went into the living-room, her limbs were like water. Sitting down upon the couch was like giving way beneath an enormous weight.

With his accusing eyes Bayliss had scourged her for her doubt of him. His look had been a challenge and she had met it with simpering weakness. She who had been so strong but an hour before, she who had gathered to herself the very strength of the earth as she had walked through the fields, she who had taken into her own hands the sure direction of her life!

How long was it now since they had left? Her eyes sought the clock where it stood upon the mantel. Bayliss Carew . . . going through the white enchantment of the Hollow with the girl, Zenka, who must be, in the deep underflow of his consciousness, a phosphorescence luminous and dark! She would go stark mad, delivered over to this following, following them with her mind.

She got up quickly from the couch, took her coat from its place in the hall, and hurried into the open air. A madness seized her, sent her running from the house, out upon the road now, and down, down into the Hollow—running so that the breath ached in her throat. An exhilaration unlike anything she had ever known swept through her. It was neither joy nor anxiety nor fear nor hope. She felt stripped of a clumsy garment. She was strong and light and free, a naked runner under the cold flow of starlight. She thought nothing more of Zenka now. She thought only of Bayliss. She must get to him—*now*. There was the dark, oily gleam of the creek now, showing momentarily under the white film of mist. She must find Bayliss, she must tell him—*tell him now*. . . .

A single gunshot tore down the dark walls of the sky, shook the hanging gossamer of the mist. It roared through her body, shattered her mind.

She knew that she had stopped in the middle of the road and yet her feet seemed to be running forward still, insensible now, beating their numb tattoo upon the hard ground. She remembered now . . . Nate Brazell standing before her in the road, his gun across one arm. . . . “You keep that han’some man o’ yours to home, see?”

“Bayliss . . . Bayliss!” She called his name aloud, over and over again. A dense cloud was descending over her consciousness; she fought against it, opened her eyes wide, stumbled forward again. “Bayliss . . . Bayliss. . . .”

A dark shape was emerging toward her out of the shadows of the dwarf oaks at the bend in the road. It seemed to waver, to spread out like a blot in the pale glow of the stars. “Bay. . . .” His name, as she uttered it, sounded like a shrill scream through the thick silence that was dropping down about her. . . .

She knew that for the first time in her life she had fainted. But now, it was pleasant here, at the side of the road in the glimmering Hollow, to lie inert with Bayliss holding her, stroking her temples, saying something in a very low voice.

She moved a little so that she could look closely at his face.

“Feeling better, little enemy?” he asked her.

She did not want to speak. She wanted to touch him, to drink him in, to know that he was real. To put her hand so, just along his throat and down within his collar, made her almost swoon again. She clung to him, desperately. “Are you hurt, Bay?”

“Not a scratch. But don’t talk now. Just lie quiet for a moment.”

She lay back in his arms. “What happened?” she asked him.

He brought his head down close to her, his cheek touching her hair. “That drunken fool, Nate,” he told her. “I was coming back—past the pasture. Zenka went on to stay with Fanny. He stepped out into the road ahead of me with a shotgun in his hands. We had words. When I refused to tell him where Zenka was he lifted his gun. It went off before I could get it away from him. I threw it into the slough.”

“Where—where is he now?”

“He’s lying in the ditch up there. He’ll come to after a while and go back home and sleep it off.”

Elsa drew herself, trembling, against him. “That shot, Bay! I’ll hear it for the rest of my life,” she told him.

His arms closed about her again and she sat very still, looking eastward where the mist had lifted and revealed the gray-silver sea of the sedge. Out of it she imagined a thin, mysterious sound came, a faint heaving, a remote and eerie crackling.

“How are you feeling now?” he asked her.

“Take me home, Bay,” she whispered.

He got to his feet and lifted her with him. For a brief second they stood together under the starlight. She lifted her hands and drew his head suddenly down to her and kissed him. He caught her up then and a deep warmth surged through her, strong and sensational as pain. Tears flowed from her eyes—she felt them wetting his cheeks, his lips.

“Take me home, Bay, take me home,” she whispered again.

From between her flickering lashes the road ahead blurred and wound erratically upward toward the Mountain.

CHAPTER XIX

All day long, Elsa dwelt in a consecrated region beyond any evil, any sadness. Whenever she went out into the yard before the house, she could look down and see Bayliss at work on the fall plowing in the field to the eastward. She would stand there for many minutes, with a lost, rapt gaze out over the rain-haunted land. The gray, moist air felt along her cheek, her throat, with a tenderness that brought tears of sheer bliss to her eyes, and she would return again to the house with a singing in her blood.

In mid-afternoon, Gorham returned from Sundower. Elsa, seeing him coming along the roadway through the Hollow, wondered absently whether the news of Bayliss's meeting with Nate Brazell had by any chance got abroad in the district. Her thoughts turned to Zenka. Had the girl spent the night with Fanny Ipsmiller, as she had planned, or had she returned home?

Gorham drove into the yard and Elsa walked down toward the barn as he took the horse out of the shafts.

"Did you have a good visit with your cousin?" she asked him.

"Fine. I thought I'd be gettin' back earlier, but it ain't always easy to break away," Gorham said with a smile. "Then I spent a couple of hours in town I wasn't countin' on. I s'pose you heard the news 'bout old Nate Brazell, eh?"

Elsa felt a sudden uneasiness come over her at the question. "Why, no, Gorham. We haven't heard anything. What is it?"

Gorham spat quickly to one side. "I guess I'd do better if I didn't talk so much. I do too much talkin', I do. Anyhow, if you ain't heard, I guess I'll let the boss tell you. It's kinda upsettin' news, this."

"Nonsense, Gorham!" She spoke with a sharp anxiety that made the man glance at her questioningly. She hastened to modify her tone. "What is there to upset me—unless it's bad news from the folks at home? Tell me."

"Oh, no—it ain't got anything to do with your folks. It's just about Nate Brazell. He's dead."

"Gorham! Nate Brazell is dead?"

Gorham spat once more, emphatically. “Yep—he up and hung himself last night—in his cowshed.”

Elsa looked blankly past him at the low-scudding company of clouds, gray, blue, purple, tattered with rain, that seemed to be just within arm’s reach above the Mountain. Nate Brazell . . . Gorham, now that he had begun, seemed bent upon going on and on.

“Nate’s wife spent the night with Fanny Ipsmiller. Nate was drunk in town for the last couple of days, they tell me. Anyhow, the wife stayed with Fanny last night and when the two women went over in the mornin’—there they found him—hanging to a beam with a halter round his neck. Nels went over and cut him down, but it didn’t do Nate any good. He must ’a’ been dead most o’ the night, accordin’ to what the Doc says.”

“And where’s his wife, Gorham?”

“They took her home to her father, other side o’ Hurley. She’s gone off her head, they say, with the shock. Anyhow, they can’t get her to say anything about it. They seem to think mebbe there might be some way of accountin’ for it if they could only get her to say somethin’, but she can’t do nothin’ but cry like she’s gone off her head.”

She felt Gorham’s eyes upon her with a furtive curiosity. Perhaps he knew more than he was telling. Had he heard Bayliss’ name mentioned in connection with the tragedy? She wondered. Suddenly a fierce revolt broke through the cloak of horror that had come down over her mind at hearing Gorham’s story. In her hour of ecstasy a sordid tragedy had thrust itself into her life. Her flesh shrank from the pitiless onslaught of the grim thing. She turned back to the house, scarcely seeing the path before her.

Lurking behind her sense of revolt, too, was the grim fear that in some way the name of Bayliss Carew might even now be on the lips of those who paused to talk of Nate Brazell and Zenka, his wife. Even now the shadow of the colorful Carews might be moving across the earth to blot out her day of rapture. Instinctively she drew back, her whole being on the defensive against an unseen adversary.

Bayliss came up from the field directly. Through the kitchen window she watched him while he stood and talked with Gorham. She saw him take his hat from his head and run his fingers through his hair. Then he shrugged his shoulders—that was a gesture of Peter Carew’s, she thought to herself—and came up the pathway to the house.

She met him at the door. He smiled at her in a wry way, put his hand under her chin, and kissed her. "Gorham has told you," he said. She met his eyes fully and thought again, as she had thought long ago, that they were the color of dark-green moss under ice. They had in them the warmth of a growing thing, deep down, under a hard and shining surface. "Yes, he told me," she said. "I've been waiting for you to come up." His look held her with a compelling strength. "You aren't going to let this business spoil things—between us," he said then. "There'll be the usual amount of talk, of course." She shook her head and smiled and drew his face down to her own.

Life drifted through the warm, drowsing afternoons of October, through the brown and wet twilights of November, and through the crystal darkness of December. Elsa felt herself drifting with it, surrendered to a supreme, dreamlike happiness that enclosed her, with Bayliss, entirely in its enchantment. She was aware—as though faint and unalarming rumors reached her in that spell—that life outside their little house on the Mountain continued in its even way as it had always done.

The death of Nate Brazell was seldom mentioned now, unless a stranger came to the district and listened to the story beside some fireside of a chilly night. Brazell's land had been sold and rumor had it that Zenka and her family were living on the money in comparative luxury south of Hurley. The people in the Hollow had intrenched themselves against the winter, scraping and saving that they might send their children well dressed to school. Joe Tracy had spent three days with Leon on the Bowers farm. Elsa had gone over and talked with him on a Saturday night when Reef had come from town and brought Clarice with him for supper. For a few days after he had left again, every one talked of how well he looked, and prosperous, and how he had sung and played for them and told new tales of life in South Dakota. The women of the district had given a "shower" for Lily Fosberg, and Elsa had sent a silk coverlet as her gift, through Clarice. Grace Carew had wandered alone into the fields on a night of cold rain and had been found on an old trail that ran past the eastern edge of the Hollow. One of the Phillips boys had come upon her there on his way home from a neighbor's and had brought her back to the Carew house at midnight. Michael Carew had gone to Texas and had come back, and now the half of Sundower and the surrounding district was aflame with the excitement his reports had kindled.

But to Elsa the life of the people about her seemed no longer real. Reality for her was bounded now by the sweet walls of the house on the Mountain. Here, of a night when the wind noised its frozen sorrows through

the Hollow, she would sit curled on a cushion on the floor, her head resting against Bayliss' knee, while they read together and talked. Reality for her was romance—romance that had its realm somewhere above the crisp earth glittering with its early frost, somewhere beneath the pointed stars with their cold fiery brilliance. Reality dwelt in the first snowfall of the year, weaving upon the dim loom of the air its slow, white silence, its loitering, soft dream. It dwelt intensely in the twilight image of Bayliss coming up the slope from the barns, pushing on through the gray-white desolation, a figure of singular loneliness, singular patience, and pride.

On a bright day in the second week of December, Fanny Ipsmiller visited Elsa and spent the afternoon before the open fireplace in the living-room. She talked cheerfully of the new dress she was having made for Christmas. There was a new dressmaker now in Sundower, sewing for Clarice Fletcher, and the Magnusson girls, and Lily Fosberg who, of course, would need something special now. And wasn't it a queer thing, now, that Florence Breen and Ada Carew couldn't be satisfied with the clothes they could buy or have made for them in Sundower? Even Hildreth and Grace sent away for nearly everything they wore—though, of course poor Grace didn't take much interest in clothes these days, nor anything else for that matter. They were talking about Grace just last week, at a meeting of the Ladies' Aid in Sundower, though what good people got out of talking about such things, Fanny never *could* see.

"I don't know as I'll go to any more o' their meetin's, either," Fanny declared with a stout squaring of her broad shoulders. "I get sick o' their waggin' tongues. I'm more at home with my cows an' chickens, when it comes right down to it."

"They probably mean well enough by it, Fanny," Elsa observed.

"I don't see as it matters much how well you mean if it's harm you're doin' anyhow," Fanny protested. "There's that poor Axel Fosberg, now. They can't keep their tongues off him. Workin' like a dog for a little yella-haired snip, I heard one o' them sayin' at the last meetin'. It made me boilin' mad. As if he didn't marry the girl and she's keepin' his house good for him, too. Better'n a whole lot that's talkin' about her behind her back, if I know anything. But of course it's them that can't afford to talk that always does the most of it."

"I wouldn't listen to them, Fanny," Elsa said.

“I don’t—only there’s some things you can’t help hearin’. Unless you’re *deef!* It’s fine for you, of course, that’s got a man to talk to—though there’s them that would like to pretend you’re to be pitied.”

“Nobody pities me, Fanny,” Elsa laughed. “I don’t need it.”

“If you needed it, they wouldn’t do it. I’ve found that out. One o’ them—there’s no use mentionin’ names, of course—one o’ them said the other day, ‘Poor Elsa Bowers,’ she said, ‘keepin’ her head up so proud above it all!’ I flared up. ‘Above *what*, in God’s name?’ I asked ’em. They just shut up, then, seein’ I was listenin’. They’re jealous, the whole pack of ’em. Jealous o’ Lily that’s got a good husband that’ll work hard for her an’ give her a home, and jealous o’ you because you married a man that the whole pack of ’em together couldn’t have got hold of with a lasso. They can’t stand to think that Elsa Bowers married one o’ the Carews, that’s what! And that Mrs. Block is the worst of ’em all, although one of hers did.”

Elsa smiled to cover her irritation. Why should they pity her, she wondered. Even after Fanny had left, she continued to think about it until she felt ashamed that she should concern herself so deeply with what people might find to say about her and Bayliss. Had she not known them long enough to expect something of the kind? She dismissed it forcibly from her mind and resolved to say nothing about it even to Bayliss. She was living in love, and everything, even the petty gossip of her neighbors, contributed to the beautiful intensity of her life.

In January, Hildreth Carew came one evening to have supper with Elsa and Bayliss, with Grace vaguely in her wake. Elsa had seen very little of Grace Carew during the months that followed that memorable scene with her in the summer. For a long time, Elsa had been unable to think of her without bitterness. But when life was filled with love there was no place for bitter feeling. Besides, Grace was a thing of pity now.

Elsa took them to the living-room where Grace seated herself close to the fire, like a leaf shriveling inward toward a flame, Elsa thought. How decrepit Peter’s widow had become, how wizened and furtive! Elsa recalled the rosy, buxom young woman of a dozen years ago, rocking to and fro in the chair in the Bowers sitting-room, with the eyes of sunlight moving up and down her white taffeta dress. And this was Peter’s widow!

Hildreth had been talking of Nellie’s children when Grace spoke up querulously. “What’s Baysie doing out there, anyhow? Hasn’t he got men to

do his work for him? Why doesn't he come in and talk to me?"

"Now, Grace," Hildreth said patiently, "you know Bayliss does half his own work. You've heard us say that often enough, haven't you?"

At that moment Elsa heard Bayliss come in. Grace too, heard his footstep and Elsa noted the tilted attitude of her head as she listened. There was something appalling in that attitude. When he came in at last, lighting his pipe and settling himself upon the arm of Elsa's chair, she saw the penetrating look that Grace turned upon him.

"Well, what's exciting down home?" he asked lightly as he flipped a match into the fire.

He leaned back so that his arm rested about Elsa's shoulder. Grace's eyes, intent upon him now, became sharp black points in her drawn face. Elsa felt uncomfortable before the unnatural fixity of that look. She would have got up from her chair and left the room had Grace not spoken suddenly, her voice slow and sweet and incredible.

"How like Peter you are, Baysie, dear!" she said. "You're getting more and more like him."

"You flatter me, Aunt Grace," Bayliss laughed. "Peter was a very handsome man."

Grace smiled fondly. "Peter was a very handsome man," she repeated absently. "The women all said so. They were all in love with my Peter."

"Michael is thinking of going to Texas next week," Hildreth broke in.

But Grace was not to be put aside so easily.

"Peter liked the women, too," she said in a louder voice. "And they tell me you're like him there, Baysie. He used to go down to see those Bohemian women. There was something wild about them, he used to say. You be more careful, Baysie, dear. You know what happened to Peter—and you're Peter now!"

"Grace!"

It was Hildreth's voice, like snapping steel. Elsa had felt Bayliss press his fingers deeply into her shoulder as Grace's idle voice moved on. She looked down at her hands, tightly clasped in her lap, and waited.

Grace subsided slowly back into her chair, her eyes closed, her entire figure relaxed as a tired child's. Elsa was suddenly overcome with an infinite pity for her.

When they were seated at the supper table, Hildreth spoke again of Michael. "As I was saying, Michael is planning a trip to Texas next week."

"He spoke of it the other day," Bayliss said.

"Yes—he'd tell you about it, of course," Hildreth observed sharply. "He hasn't told *me* yet. I had to find out from Nellie."

Something of her old fierceness was in her voice, Elsa thought as she glanced up quickly. Bayliss smiled slowly, his eyes on his plate.

"So long as you found out, Aunt Hild," he remarked, "what difference does it make who told you? Michael would have said something about it, probably, if——"

"Michael would have said nothing about it to me," Hildreth interrupted. "And that's what makes the difference, Bayliss. It's one of the signs."

"Signs of what?" Bayliss asked her, looking up quickly.

"I've been through enough of this kind of thing, my boy, to have had my eyes opened. When a man is making a success of a thing he'll talk about it till you're tired listening to him. It's when he begins to slip that he keeps it to himself."

It was quite apparent to Elsa that Bayliss was growing a little impatient with Hildreth. Perhaps he had cause for impatience. Hildreth was obviously in a deplorably nervous state. Her constant care of Grace was enough in itself to wear down the resistance of a normally healthy woman and Hildreth had grown markedly old during the past few months. Something had gone out of her life with the passing of Peter Carew. Elsa often wondered if Hildreth had not taken Peter's death more to heart even than Grace, little as she had shown it. Her spirit seemed quenched, only a powdery ash remaining.

Now, however, beneath the tragic mask of her face there shone that fierce, triumphant and perverse excitement that Elsa had seen there before when Hildreth had been wont to dwell upon the hazardous escapades of the Carew men. It was so baffling, so enigmatical, that for the moment she was scarcely aware of what Hildreth was saying, so intent was she upon the woman's manner.

"If Michael chose to say nothing about it, Aunt Hild," Bayliss said patiently, "it was probably because he thought you have enough to worry about already without adding more."

“Without adding more! Do you think it adds nothing when I see Michael and Mahlon Breen spending hours together, meeting nearly every night in the week to talk over business behind closed doors? Do you think it adds nothing when I know that half the poor wretches in Sundower and half the farmers in the district have put their money into the hands of Mahlon Breen _____”

“Let’s talk no more about it, Aunt Hild,” Bayliss broke out suddenly. “Men don’t all talk over their business affairs with the women of the family. Perhaps——”

“We’ll say no more about it, then,” Hildreth snapped. “I’ll tell you this, though. The Carew men have managed to bring disgrace—yes, disgrace—upon the family name twice before. When it comes again, they’ll turn to their women—as they’ve always done—to find a way out of it. What I want you to remember, Bayliss, is this—you can’t come to Hildreth Carew! She’s been through enough—too much. She’s too old to go through any more—too old, and too tired. You’ll have nobody but the younger ones to turn to—Nellie, poor thing, and Ada—and Elsa, here.”

Elsa felt a severe tightening about her heart that left her breathless. She had an actual sense of being enclosed in a suffocating space that excluded the others seated about the table. Grace Carew sat speechless and apart, her placid face betraying no interest in what had passed between Hildreth and Bayliss. In the lull that followed, she looked across the table at Hildreth and a shadow passed quickly over her face.

“Yes—she’s too tired,” she said. “Let’s go home, Hildreth. It’s getting late, you know.”

“Eat your supper, Grace,” Hildreth replied. “I’ll go home when I’m ready.”

Elsa hastened to tell Hildreth of a visit to Chicago which she and Bayliss were planning to make before seeding time in the spring. Bayliss would get another man to stay with Gorham while they were away. It was to be their real honeymoon. But all her efforts to restore a pleasant mood were futile. Hildreth responded politely, but without spirit. Bayliss had little to say during the rest of the meal.

It was not until they had gone to the kitchen and were busy washing the supper dishes that Hildreth began to talk freely again. Bayliss was with Grace in the living-room.

“I’m an old witch to come here and bother you with my wornout, useless bones,” she said lightly, though an extraordinary weariness weighted every word she spoke.

“Oh, Hildreth, how you do enjoy humbling yourself!” Elsa exclaimed, trying to laugh. “As though anybody in the world would believe it.”

Hildreth shrugged her thin shoulders. “No, child, I mean what I say. It’s all wrong that one so young as you should have to start in now and grow old for the sake of a family of men who’ll never thank you for what you’ve done for them. I know—I’ve done it all my life. That’s why I warned you, my dear. And I *did* warn you. Not that I blame you for doing what you did—I’d have done the same thing myself if I had been in your place.”

“But you don’t *know*, Hildreth,” Elsa protested. “Perhaps you’re quite mistaken about it all. Bayliss hasn’t expressed any doubt about the thing. Have you any real reason for being afraid?”

Hildreth smiled, a little bitterly. “I’m an old hand at this kind of thing, my child. I’m not making many mistakes at my time of life—after all I’ve been through.”

Elsa smiled and changed the subject cheerfully, but when Hildreth and Grace had gone at last she fought in vain to free herself of the uneasiness that had settled down upon her. She did not speak of it to Bayliss until they were in their room together. She might not have spoken of it then had it not been for the troubled look in his eyes.

“I thought Hildreth looked awfully old and drawn tonight,” she said. “Don’t you think that Grace is becoming too much of a strain for her?”

She noted his quick glance and the sudden deepening of the two furrows between his eyes. “The fact is,” he said, “poor old Hild is just about out of the game. Her old sporting blood has dried up. I told her that the other day when I dropped in on them and she was sounding our doom. For a minute she showed some of her old fighting spirit, but it didn’t last. She’s through!”

Elsa was seized with an indescribable sadness at the thought of Hildreth Carew’s unquenchable spirit cooling at last to a mere glow among its own dead embers. Where now were the little fires that used to leap from her eyes when she spoke? Hildreth Carew, pacing slowly in the garden, plucking flowers from their crisp stems . . . now here, now there . . . a blossom of recklessness . . . a bloom of sorrow.

Bayliss came to her impulsively and caught her in his arms. “Damn it all!” he exclaimed, “I wish they’d stay away and leave us alone.” He

stooped and kissed her hungrily. “It’s still a dream to me that I really have you, little enemy.”

His impetuosity swept her away, beyond the hurt of things as they were. She looked up into his keen face, alive now with the desire to stand between her and the world. A sudden fear caught at her heart: if that eager look of his should vanish for her, life would become an empty husk.

CHAPTER XX

Winds became raw and wet, clawing great uncouth gullies down through the snowdrifts of the Mountain, leaving drab patches on their course over the white wastes of the Hollow, hounding the ragged clouds across a sullen sky. March had come again.

Elsa was militantly, fiercely reveling in life. The fears that Hildreth Carew had awakened within her had been stimulated from time to time by vague rumors that had reached her from the district. Fanny Ipsmiller had been down to see her again, eager to know what the Carews were thinking—and was it true that Hildreth Carew had refused to put a dollar of her own money into this business in Texas? Elsa's mother had complained that Uncle Fred had listened to Michael Carew long enough to convince himself that he need not work another day of his life unless he chose to do so. He had taken his savings and placed them in the keeping of Mahlon Breen and had received a stock certificate in return, though Reef had called him an old fool for it. But to all dark rumors Elsa turned a confident face. Was it not as Bayliss had said? Uncertainty was romance—and romance was life! And Elsa Bowers, of Elder's Hollow, was only beginning to live.

When Bayliss told her at last that he was ready to fulfill his promise of a visit to Chicago for a week before the spring work began, Elsa's excitement knew no bounds. She rode Fleta over to the Bowers farm to tell them that she was really going—had spent the day getting everything ready so that they could leave in the morning.

She rode through the windy cottonwood grove a little after sunset. Reef was home from Hurley, and there was Clarice with him in the yard. Leon came from the barn to take Fleta from her and she walked indoors with Reef and Clarice. Her mother sat at the kitchen table with a basket of mending in her lap. She leaned back in her chair and set the basket on the table as the three entered.

"Well!" she said, adjusting her glasses and looking up inquiringly. "Funny—I was thinkin' of you just a minute ago and wonderin' if you wouldn't be along. How's everything over to the Mountain? We don't see much of you these days. How's Bayliss?"

"He's fine," Elsa said, tossing her soft hat down upon the table.

“You can be thankful, then,” her mother went on. “I don’t know anybody scarcely that ain’t laid up with the cold. It’s goin’ round. March is bad for sickness, anyhow. Poor Uncle Fred has been feelin’ miserable for the last week. He went and sent for a fool cough medicine in the catalogue and I’m blamed if that ain’t what’s the matter with him now! He’s got such a hankerin’ for it he can’t leave it alone. I tell him it’ll send him back to drinkin’ again if he ain’t careful.”

Elsa smiled. “Bless his old heart! Let him have his cough medicine, for goodness’ sake! Do you remember the time he caught us drinking the vanilla, Reef, and took the bottle away from us and finished it himself?”

Reef chuckled and Elsa’s mother shook her head and laughed.

“Bayliss and I are going to run down to Chicago for a week or ten days,” Elsa said presently, making an effort to be casual. In an indefinable way she felt a little self-conscious about it. “Bay wants a little vacation before he begins the spring work. We’re leaving tomorrow.”

For a moment an imponderable silence lay over the others. Then it seemed they were all talking at once, enthusiastically, with friendly envy, urging her to see everything while she was there, to go to this place and that place that they had read about, to make the most of her visit. Her mother’s one comment was that she hoped Elsa would not forget to write.

Then Leon came in, and behind him Uncle Fred and Steve Bowers, and the news had to be told again. Wrinkles appeared on the high, pale panel of Uncle Fred’s brow, so startling above his weathered face. He gave a brief grunt, turned to his medicine bottle on the cupboard shelf, and treated himself to two audible swallows. Elsa laughed at him, then listened to what her father had to say about her trip to Chicago. He had been there, long ago, she knew, and in the old days there had been an anecdote or two which he would tell when the children were not around to hear. Now a glint of his old humor appeared and he chuckled to himself as he made his way to the sink to wash his hands. “That’s *some* town!” he remarked. “Or it used to be, anyhow, when I saw it. But I guess the paint’s all wore off since then, though the Lord knows we spread enough of it around to last for a century.”

“Well, there’s no need of us settin’ in the kitchen, anyhow,” said Elsa’s mother, gathering up her work. “Get on into the sittin’-room, all of you.”

For an hour or so, Clarice, Reef, Leon and Elsa played cards, while Uncle Fred and Steve Bowers sat in one corner of the room with a

checkerboard before them on their knees. Elsa left the others finally and went to the kitchen to help her mother prepare coffee and cake.

“I had Fanny Ipsmiller over to see me the other day,” her mother said as she shook down the fire in the range.

“She was up to see me about a week ago,” Elsa replied.

“She said she was.” Her mother glanced toward the other room before she went on. “She didn’t say anything to you about that wife of Brazell’s, did she?”

“Who? Zenka?”

“That’s her. I never can call that one by name. You remember when they found Nate hangin’ in the cowshed, she went into fits and wouldn’t talk to any one about it. Well, she’s talkin’ now, if what Fanny says is true—and I guess you can believe Fanny if you can believe any one.”

Elsa felt a hot ringing in her ears. She set the cups and saucers down upon the table with a nervous clatter. “What do you mean?” she asked.

Her mother raised her eyebrows and set her lips firmly. “Well, I mayn’t be doin’ the right thing in talkin’ about it, but it seems to me you ought to know and I guess I can tell you as well as anybody else. I always say it’s the people who are talked about that are the last to hear it. They don’t say it right out, of course, but they might as well say it out and be done with it as think it.”

“What’s it all about?” Elsa asked impatiently, putting herself on the defensive at once.

“Well, it seems Nate was drunk in town the day before he hung himself and I guess he did some talkin’ on the street about Bayliss. Anyhow, they’re sayin’ now that Nate would be alive today if Bayliss Carew had left his wife alone. They’re sayin’ Nate went crazy with jealousy on account of Bayliss. And that—that wife—I can’t for the life of me think of her name——”

“Zenka,” Elsa prompted.

“They say she’s been talkin’ about Bayliss takin’ her home that night and leavin’ her with Fanny so she wouldn’t have to sleep under the same roof with her own husband.”

Elsa laughed out sharply, her head jerking back in an involuntary gesture. “What rot! Zenka was up to see us and asked us to take her to Fanny’s because she was afraid of Nate when he was drunk. I could have

told you that long ago, but—well, it’s all silly. I’m surprised you listened to it at all. Do they think Bayliss has no sense—no decency?”

Her mother hung a dish towel carefully on its rack. Her face was curiously placid, unconcerned, as though the subject they were discussing was, after all, no affair of hers.

“We used to talk about the Carew men ourselves—once,” she said quietly. “And what we used to say would not sound very good to a woman married to one of them. You may expect to hear things, now that you’re one of them—and some of the things may be true, even if you are married to Bayliss Carew. A Carew woman never sees anything wrong in a Carew man. Everybody knows that.”

Heat stung into Elsa’s cheeks and her shoulders stiffened against the half-humorous gibe. “You mean that you think Bayliss——”

“Now don’t take on like that,” her mother chided in a comfortable tone. “I don’t take any stock in the gossip. I never did, for that matter, in any gossip. Likely enough Bayliss Carew hasn’t started to cast sheep’s eyes just yet, anyhow. I’m just tellin’ you what’s bein’ said behind your back.”

Elsa was dumfounded to hear her mother humming a little tune to herself as she carried the coffee pot from the stove and filled the cups on the table. She did not know whether to laugh or cry out from the hard anger that had gathered within her. At last, without a word, she placed the cups on a tray and carried it into the other room.

Clarice and Reef were talking about Lily and Axel Fosberg as she entered and set the tray on the table.

“It’s queer,” Reef was saying, “that Axel should want to sell out now and move away just when they’ve got fairly settled.”

“It’s going to be hard on Lily, with the baby so small,” Clarice declared indignantly. “I’ve always thought Axel was a little queer myself, but the funny part of it is that Lily is just as crazy to go as he is. With the baby premature and everything, I’d think she would have the sense to stay where she is for a while. But there never was any telling what Lily would do.”

Elsa looked from Reef to Clarice. “What was that you were saying about Lily?” she asked. “I missed that.”

“Haven’t you heard?” Clarice replied. “They’ve decided to go West—out to Washington. Somewhere near Seattle. Axel had a letter from an old friend of his out there and he took it into his head all of a sudden to go. I

thought you must have heard. But you're so scarce these days nobody ever sees or hears anything of you or Bayliss any more."

"And Axel's land is for sale cheap," Reef put in dryly. "I heard the other day that old Seth Carew was thinking about taking it."

Elsa could no longer listen to what was being said. Axel and Lily were going away! What did that mean? What could it mean except that Axel had come to know at last? Axel Fosberg, hopefully, proudly building his frame house for Lily—and then, with the uncomplaining patience of a heavy, dumb brute, rebuilding out of the ashes of his dreams!

Uncle Fred sat stirring his coffee, listening importantly. "I'd think Seth Carew would 'a' put all his money in this Texas deal," he declared stoutly. "Leastways, all he can spare. What's he want with more land? He can't make the money out o' land that he can out o' oil—an' I know it! I got my money in oil an' I figure on spendin' next winter in Florida. What with this cold an' all hangin' on, I ought to anyhow."

Elsa looked at Reef who sat back in his chair, his eyes on the table. "There have been a lot of people around here thinking like that, Uncle Fred," he observed. "I think some of them would be willing to give up the trip to Florida if they thought they could get their money back." His mouth was set in a straight line, his eyes narrowed and distant.

"The Whitneys, for instance," Clarice remarked.

"What's the matter with the Whitneys, Clarice?" Elsa asked, irritated.

"The Whitneys aren't the only ones," Reef said darkly, tapping on the table with his fingers.

Elsa glanced from one to another of them. Leon smiled evasively, rose and stretched his long limbs. Her father cleared his throat, got up and spat into the heater, then sat down again with his slippered feet resting on the nickel-plated base of the stove. Into Elsa's sense of irritation crept now a vague alarm.

"Well—there's no need of your being so secretive about it," she said, looking at Reef.

Reef hunched his shoulders in his old, discomfited way. "I'm not trying to hide anything from you, Else," he said. "It's just that people are beginning to suspect this scheme of Michael Carew's isn't all he made it out to be a few months ago. I don't mean that there's any notion that the business is crooked, but—it just hasn't panned out the way they expected. When people

like Fanny Ipsmiller put their money into a thing, they want to get something back. Somebody—some friends of the Whitneys—living in Texas—warned them to keep out of it and now—well, there’s a lot of talk. That’s all.”

As she looked across at Reef’s serious, dark face, a pang struck through Elsa. But then, as her eyes moved from one to the other of those in the room, from her father in his rocking-chair beside the stove, to her mother and Uncle Fred and Clarice and Leon grouped about the table, it seemed to her that the very air was charged with hostility, not only toward Michael and Mahlon Breen, but toward all the Carews.

“I don’t know anything about the scheme, of course,” she said in a voice that sounded very small and cold, “but I don’t think Michael would do anything wrong—I mean——”

She ceased speaking, as she saw the smile on Reef’s face. “Of course, Else, you wouldn’t see anything wrong in Michael Carew taking money from these poor devils in the Hollow—and those hopeful, ignorant fools in Sundower and Hurley—and giving them a handful of nicely decorated certificates in return. The people in the Hollow can’t afford to lose a barrel of potatoes, and Michael Carew knows that, damned well!”

While Reef’s voice rose accusingly, Elsa sat staring at her hands, clasped before her on the table. She could not control the mounting resentment that set her trembling as she listened.

“Did Michael steal the money from them, Reef?” she asked. “Were they not in their right minds? Or did they not know what they were doing? They knew they were speculating, didn’t they? There’s no such thing as absolute certainty in speculation. I don’t see how they can blame Michael for what they do themselves.”

“For what they would never have done,” Reef sneered, “if it hadn’t been for the smooth line of talk Michael Carew handed them. The Carews have been like small gods in this part of the world, Else, and you know it. If a Carew says a thing is good business, that settles it for nine out of every ten men and women in the county.”

“The Carews are all alike, Elsa,” her mother put in suddenly, “so what’s the use of you tryin’ to hide it? They’ll get away with whatever they can, that’s what.”

“What have they ever done to you?” Elsa demanded.

“They’ve done enough!” her father broke forth suddenly. “Good God, girl, have you forgotten everything that ever happened?”

A pain stabbed through Elsa’s heart. Had she not lain in the door of the haymow one hot August day and looked down upon the fashionable Carew women and their extraordinary little boy . . . and her own heart breaking at the thought of Reef lying asleep and dreaming of his pain?

“I—I haven’t forgotten,” she said, her voice unsteady almost to breaking. “But all these—these grasping little souls in Sundower—these Whitneys and all the rest of them—as long as they thought they were going to make a dollar out of the Carews, they were all smiles and flattery. Now—because some one has a doubt—they’re ready to tear every Carew limb from limb. It would serve them right if they lost every nickel they ever owned!”

Reef smiled slowly at her and she realized that she was dangerously near to tears. “You don’t mean that, Else,” he said in a changed tone. “You couldn’t. You’re still too much one of us to wish anything like that.”

Elsa’s mother spoke without looking up from her work. “No—she ain’t—she ain’t. She’s a Carew. The Carew women never did see anything wrong in their men, let them do what they will.”

Elsa pushed her chair back from the table and stood up. She could not speak just then. She turned away and went to the kitchen where she caught up her hat from the table, her jacket from a chair. She put on her hat with nervous hands, then stepped back into the sitting-room. Uncle Fred was reading his coffee cup, tilting it this way and that in the hope of finding the fortune he sought. Steve Bowers was sighing, “Ho-hum! Time to go to bed!”—though he sat on before the heater, his toes in their wool socks curling inward and then upward, back and forth. Leon sat idly shuffling the cards. Reef had taken a cigarette and was lighting it leisurely. Clarice had got up to get her hat and coat, preparing to go home.

Each detail of that scene burned itself upon Elsa’s mind with painful significance. Here was a group of human beings to whom she infinitely no longer belonged. Had she taken herself away from them—or had they cast her out? She could not tell.

CHAPTER XXI

Seated opposite Bayliss in the train on the following day, Elsa was moved by a strong impulse to cry. She was a little girl again, loving the wide world in a geography book, or voyaging sheer out of time and space in a craft of grandeur and speed incomparable, over and above the lazy green leaves of the pigweed house. She was little Elsa Bowers, going unimaginably far—to Chicago with Bayliss Carew. She was dwelling out there on the horizon, miles away, where all this ceaselessly whirling landscape had its fixed center. She was hunting through the streets of every tiny, snow-dimmed prairie town, peering under the roofs of houses, stealing all their precious secrets in a riotous elfin banditry. She was in flight above the lonely white stretches of an unfamiliar world, over the black smudges of woods and fields and tumbling, vacant hills. She was uncontrollably, shamelessly happy, gathering all this life of the earth into herself, sealing it fast within.

Bayliss was speaking to her in a low, strangely wistful tone. “Your face is the most vivid thing I’ve ever seen, Elsa. What’s going on back there behind those eyes of yours?”

“I could never, never tell,” she confessed with a smile.

He leaned toward her and took her hands. “Do you know—if we ever went out into the world together—you and I—into a more complex life, I mean—I’d never be able to hold you, I don’t think I ever realized that before.”

She felt a momentary sharp excitement, a quick stirring of pleasure at his words. She smiled a little, from a sense of intrigue with herself against him. Perhaps, after all, it was well for Bayliss to think that. And yet, how infinitely wrong he was, how adorably stupid!

In Chicago Joel met them. And within the first half hour Elsa became aware of the cool, strong change that had come into her mind in regard to him. She glanced covertly from time to time at his mobile, intent face, with its flashing humor and its sudden, almost melancholy repose, and the startling truth dawned upon her that nothing could have been more cruel than a marriage between him and Lily Fletcher. She thought of Lily’s child, the child that was Joel Carew’s. There would be a beauty and a romance in

that child, a powerful charm that no child of faithful Axel Fosberg's could ever possess. She recalled the bitterness with which she had thought of Joel Carew and the violent passion which Lily's confession had roused in her. The months had worked their change in her, she knew, a change she might never have admitted to herself had it not been for this meeting with Joel Carew.

It was the consciousness of this change that disturbed her during those shrill blustering days of spring, while she and Bayliss idled through the big stores, walked through crowded streets, delighted in plays and music and pleasant dinners together in pleasant places. Deep down within her there was that vague feeling of disquietude, as though a voice there said, "A Carew woman . . . setting aside the misdeeds of the Carews . . . buying her clothes in Chicago . . . another Florence Breen, another Grace, another Ada." But the voice was very faint, and at her side the voice of Bayliss was eager, urgent.

Besides, she was supremely, insouciantly happy. She was especially happy in the violence, the stride of the great, obstreperous city, the fierce roar of the wind that was its voice, the white-green tumult of the waves breaking on the shore of Lake Michigan, its soul. She was reluctant to leave it, to go back again to the known instead of on and on, forever into the unknown.

On the evening of their last day, when they stood in the whipped, green twilight and listened to the thunder of the breakers on the lake shore, Bayliss gathered her hand closely within his own and talked to her with a husky earnestness. "You'll probably never know, Elsa, just what it has meant to me to see you so happy these last few days. Some day—it may be a long way off—I want you to have everything, to go everywhere, to enjoy everything. Until that time comes, Elsa, I'm going to need you—need you terribly, perhaps."

A strange note had crept into his voice. She glanced up at him in the weird lake light and saw upon him the gloom of the mantle of Peter Carew, and the beauty of it. An uneasiness seized her.

"What makes you say that, Bayliss?" she asked him.

He smiled down at her and patted her hand softly. "Nothing—nothing! I'm just telling you that I'll need you—whatever happens, I'll need you!"

A dark presentiment passed through her. Bayliss and Joel had spent the afternoon together. She had felt sure that they were deep in the discussion of

family affairs. She knew now that Bayliss feared some impending trouble, had feared it for days.

It came scarcely as a shock to her, then, that the news of the Carew disaster awaited them at their hotel, in a telegram from Michael. She did not discuss the news with Bayliss—there would be time for that later. She knew simply that the time of her testing had come at last, and she was ready, almost eager, to face it.

Before Elsa, in the darkness of that night, stood the image of the Carews fallen in their splendor, trampled and bedraggled and torn apart by the rabble that had long fed on envy and secret hatred. The Carews—gods, demons, centaurs—whatever they were, different from the common run, and therefore cursed of them. And Bayliss—Bayliss whom she loved, among them.

Gorham had the roadster at the depot for them when they arrived in Sundower. Elsa glanced at him anxiously as he carried the luggage from the train to the waiting car. He was quite obviously excited, Elsa thought, in spite of his efforts to appear casual. He said nothing until he had thrown the luggage into the car and Bayliss was in his place before the wheel.

“I think I’ll be stayin’ in town for an hour or so, boss,” he said as he closed the door and leaned across it toward Bayliss. “I thought—it bein’ Saturday night——”

“That’s all right, Gorham,” Bayliss replied. “There seems to be a lot of people in town tonight.”

Gorham spat quickly as he turned and glanced down the main street aglow with the warm light of early evening. “It ain’t none o’ my business, of course,” he said with an air of hesitancy, “but if I was you I’d take the north road an’ turn south the other side o’ the Methodist Church. I’m thinkin’ of Mrs. Carew, there. The streets is full o’ Saturday night drunks an’ they’re doin’ a lot o’ talkin’. The—the news broke yesterday an’ they’re feelin’ kinda ugly.”

Bayliss laughed. “Thanks, Gorham,” he replied. “Do you happen to know if Michael is in town?”

“Lord, no! He’s home. I don’t think he’s hankerin’ much to be round town after what’s happened. It wouldn’t be exactly safe, to my way o’ thinkin’.”

“All right, Gorham. How’s everything at the house?”

“Everything’s fine. Only I had to let that man go. He wasn’t worth his salt.”

Bayliss laughed as he started the car and put it slowly about until it was headed into the main street of the town.

“Looks to me as if things were even worse than we thought,” he observed steadily.

Elsa was conscious of a little thrill of excitement as she looked along the street.

“Are you going out by the north road?” she asked.

His eyes were fixed upon the street before them as he replied. “Just if you say so. If I were alone now, I’d like to walk down and look them over. I’ll probably never have a better chance to find out just what they think of a Carew.”

“I think I’d like to know, myself,” she said. “And I wouldn’t want even Gorham to think that you slipped out of town by a back street.”

“That’s the old spirit!” Bayliss said with a laugh as he drove down the street.

Elsa had never seen so many people in town except on a holiday. Buggies and automobiles stood against the curbs on both sides of the street. Men lounged about in small groups, an air of deep earnestness in their manner. There were women in town, too, standing at the entrances to stores, or seated in buggies and automobiles, waiting for their men. Children were everywhere, clinging to their mother’s skirts, whining and sleepy-eyed, or sucking energetically at stick-candy. In the front seat of one ramshackle democrat sat the wife of the eldest Whitney boy, her two small children beside her. As Bayliss drove slowly by, Elsa nodded and smiled to her. The woman gave her a frozen stare, then turned her head abruptly away. The blood pounded up into Elsa’s temples. Here were the people who had but lately called her friend, who had stormed her house on a night in October, light-hearted, eager-eyed, curious.

She saw Bayliss glance at her quickly. She knew he had seen the Whitney woman’s response to her greeting.

“Steady, now,” he warned her in a whisper.

She looked to the other side of the street where a half dozen men had gathered about the entrance to the bank, the doors of which were closed, the blinds drawn. The men turned a sullen look upon her and Bayliss. Almost at the same instant another small crowd standing before the pool-hall farther down the street caught sight of the car with Bayliss at the wheel. One of them ran out into the street and Bayliss had to slow down to avoid running into him.

“Be careful, Bay,” Elsa pleaded.

“Don’t be afraid,” he replied.

As he spoke, two disorderly figures stepped down from the curb and stood directly in the way of the car. Bayliss swerved aside and came to a stop at the edge of the sidewalk. For a moment he sat in his place without speaking a word while a crowd of men swarmed from the pool-hall into the street. Elsa heard the low murmuring that grew steadily to an angry outcry in which a dozen voices joined at once. Two drunken figures lurched toward the car and were jerked back into the crowd with a suddenness that took them off their feet. Elsa looked quickly and saw Tom Phillips standing between the two, a hand on the shoulder of each. She could hear his voice above the others, “Don’t start that, you fools! Get back where you belong!” He flung them behind him into the crowd and motioned to Bayliss to get away quickly. But Bayliss sat where he was, his hands resting on the wheel, his eyes moving from one to another of those before him.

A raucous voice came from the doorway of the pool-room. “Let him get out of the car, the damn’ woman-chaser!”

Coarse, muddled cries broke at once from a dozen places in the crowd. Elsa, bewildered, heard them but only half understood their meaning. Then one shout went up which she could not fail to understand. “Where’s your Bohemian wench, Bay?”

Laughter followed the taunt, then more cries. “Who stole Brazell’s wife, Bay?” “Yeah—what made Nate hang himself, eh?” “Tell ’em, Bay—you tell ’em! We know!”

Elsa’s brain staggered under the rush of voices about her. She seized Bayliss’ arm, her eyes straining toward him. “Bay . . . Bay!”

He turned to look at her. Some one yelled from the street behind them. The next instant a large stone crashed through the windshield of the car. In the shower of splintered glass, Elsa was aware that Bayliss had shot his arm out suddenly and thrust her down violently into the seat beside him,

covering her body with his own. Then with his other hand he reached across and threw open the door on her side of the car.

“Get out, quick!” he ordered. “Run across the street and wait.”

She was out of the car and across the street before she could realize what had happened. Now she looked back, angry at herself for having obeyed him. She should have stayed there in the seat beside him. She should have made him drive away from them, out of town. It was too late now. The crowd on the sidewalk was milling about among themselves, half of them swaying drunk, vicious-eyed, cursing foully as they struggled toward Bayliss who had got down from the car and was standing now with one foot up on the curb. His hands were deep down in his pockets so that his coat was drawn tightly about his hips. He stood easily for a moment, coldly eyeing three or four who were in the forefront of the crowd. With some remote and poised corner of her mind Elsa contemplated the ease and power of his body and thrilled with pride in him. Then every fiber of her being became violently alive as she saw Bayliss step to the sidewalk.

Involuntarily she moved toward the car, although her limbs seemed about to give way beneath her. She could hear Bayliss talking in the momentary lull that had followed the crash of the windshield.

“Which one of you fellows did that?” he asked, jerking his head over his shoulder toward the car.

Some one thrust his face toward him, his head lowered, his thick forefinger tapping his chest. It was Norbert Whitney.

“*I* did,” he grunted. “*I* did! Just to show you slick Carew swine who you’ve got to settle with!”

Elsa saw Bayliss move quickly. A light flickered dizzily before her eyes and in that flicker Norbert Whitney staggered backward, his hands in the air, then bent forward and flattened out on the sidewalk.

“Just to show you that we do settle—on the spot, Norb Whitney!” Bayliss said, his face set and white, his mouth askew with a harsh smile.

Unable to restrain herself any longer, Elsa rushed back across the street. “Bayliss . . . Bayliss!” Her voice was drowned now in the confusion. It seemed to her that every one in Sundower was charging down upon the spot in which Bayliss stood with his back to the car. Farmers’ wives were hurrying along the street with children dragging behind them, gasping old women, young girls wild-eyed with fear and curiosity, little boys shouting and running—a crazy riot of human figures milling about in the failing light!

Elsa covered against the fender of the car, looking about desperately for one friendly face.

There was Leon! “Oh, Leon, Leon!” She shrieked his name but he did not hear her. “Bayliss . . . Bay!” She cried wildly, thinking she might get into the car and start it. If he would only step back now, before they closed about him!

She saw him strike out with his clenched fist and when he drew back, his hand was ragged with blood. Another man lay on the sidewalk, but now Norbert Whitney was on his feet, crouching forward, springing at Bayliss from behind. Elsa fell back against the fender of the car, cold moisture breaking out all over her body. She steeled herself to look again. They were crashing together now, horribly, Norbert in formless, senseless fury, Bayliss white, black-browed, his whole body set with the tenseness of steel.

Some one was forcing his way through the crowd. Reef! Reef with his hat off, pushing this way and that, lashing out with his one good hand, shouting angrily. “Get back—out of the way! Come on, Leon!” Leon rushed through, a blond young animal. Elsa saw Reef’s fist plunge itself into the bloated face of one of Norb Whitney’s friends. And there was Leon now, hurling himself upon another of them, a lithe, tawny arrow.

Elsa pressed her knuckles against her cheeks. She was sobbing now, laughing and crying without control. She saw Tom Phillips and two others doing their best to hold the crowd back. Reef and Leon were standing, one on either side of Bayliss, alert for any hostile move. A sudden quiet settled upon the crowd and Bayliss stepped back toward the car.

“Get away!” Tom Phillips cried, waving his arm toward Bayliss.

Elsa sprang into the car and held the door open as Bayliss stepped to the running board, wiping his streaming forehead. His clothes were all but torn from his body and he swayed slightly as he turned and gave one last look at the crowd. His face was colorless except where it was streamed with blood. His mouth was twisted into a crooked grin that made him look livid. Elsa’s eyes ached as she watched him lick his lips and begin to speak.

“I meant just what I said, Norb,” he said distinctly, smiling more steadily now. “The Carews settle. So long, old top.”

He seated himself and started the engine. Looking over his shoulder, he called to Reef and Leon who were standing near, brushing back their hair with their hands, straightening their clothes. “Going home, boys? Get in here—we can make it.”

The two got silently into the car, Elsa seating herself on Reef's knee, and Bayliss drove away, down the street and out of the town.

With the open road before them, Elsa lapsed into a sort of dream. She was no longer of the Hollow, the Mountain, the petty world of human bickerings and conceits. She had been close to something primitive, something shameless, elemental. Life had caught her up suddenly, lifted her and borne her aloft, enveloped her in another existence where she and Bayliss were two stars rushing wildly together through the reaches of eternal space.

With an impulse she could not check, she leaned toward Bayliss and touched his lips lightly with the tips of her fingers. A tremor passed through her body, shook her. He looked at her quickly and smiled.

"I'm a fine-looking specimen, eh?" he said ruefully.

She could not speak. She wanted to tell him . . . tell him that she loved him . . . loved him with a love that was an agony in her spirit. She turned away and closed her eyes.

Reef was talking now, his voice curiously apologetic beneath his anger. "The damned fools! What did they expect to get out of it? But you can't reason with that bunch. Give them a couple of drinks and the first thing they think of is a fight. Norb Whitney never could hold his head. He was like that in school."

"I saw him before he got in with the crowd," Leon said. "He was seeing red even then."

Elsa heard Bayliss' low chuckle. "Well, you fellows didn't know just what your little sister was letting you in for when she ran off with a Carew."

"I don't think we've raised much of a holler," Leon protested stoutly. "Anybody that can hit the way you can—gosh, Reef, did you see Norb go down?"

That was Leon, Elsa thought proudly, glorying in the physical.

And then Reef, thoughtful, deliberate. "I think, perhaps, it will do Norb a lot of good, when he gets time to think it over a bit. But he certainly put a crimp in this windshield."

Elsa broke into a nervous laugh, unable to control herself. She caught Bayliss' quick glance then, saw his frown.

“We got out of it lucky, at that,” he said. “Elsa might have got it instead of the car.”

“It was meant for you, Bay,” she told him.

Then she closed her eyes again and heard their voices from a distance, not knowing what they said. She was going home with Bayliss . . . she was going home with Bayliss!

They stopped at the Bowers gate only long enough to let Reef and Leon out of the car. “Tell your mother we’ll run down and see her tomorrow,” Bayliss said. “I’d make her sick if she saw me now. Tell her what happened—and make her understand.”

“Leave that to us,” Leon replied.

“So long, then,” Bayliss called. “And thanks for pitching in. It was darned decent of you. I’d have been up against it properly if you hadn’t. I hope you haven’t lost any friends on my account.”

“It isn’t the first time we’ve fought the Whitneys,” Reef grinned, and waved his cap at them as they moved away.

Elsa called good night, then fell back against the seat with an overwhelming sense of fatigue. Presently she felt Bayliss’ arm slip about her shoulders, drawing her close to his torn, grimy clothing. The car slowed down. She felt his lips moving gently over her closed eyes.

“Little enemy, you’re there!” he said. “A man can always get out and fight if he doesn’t like what’s being said about him, but a woman has to sit and take it or get out and run away. You heard all they said about Nate Brazell?”

She nodded. His face became grim and set, his mouth drew to a straight line. “I had heard some hint of it before,” he said, “through Michael. I didn’t know it had become common gossip.”

“I knew,” she told him.

“And you never said a word about it?”

“I was afraid. It—it might have been true. You’ll not understand that, I know. But I understand it. Oh, Bay—Bay—it was terrible!”

The car had come to a standstill now. Dusk had settled about them, enfolding them. She felt his arms closing about her, drawing her to him, crushing her. She opened her eyes slowly and looked up at him. His mouth was moving nervously in the struggle to control himself.

“Darling—my poor darling!” he murmured. “Why—why did you do that?”

She regarded him seriously for a moment. “Haven’t you just said—a woman has to sit and take it—or get out and run away?”

“Good God, Elsa!” he exclaimed. “Haven’t the Carew women done enough of that? Or are you going to be another of them?”

She did not reply. She could not. Deep within her was the painful memory of her first months of living with Bayliss. When one hungers for love, what place is there left for pride?

He took his arms suddenly from about her. “I’ll not have it!” he broke forth, and he set the car moving down the road again. “I’d rather have you hate me for the rest of your life than see you become another Grace Carew. What that crowd says about me—what any crowd says about me—doesn’t matter a damn. They’re going to go on saying it. They’ll find more to say—far more. They’ll rake up all the mud they can find and sling it whenever the name of a Carew is mentioned. For the most part, the Carew name will deserve it. Peter—and Michael—and Joel—all of us! But one thing I’ll have you know, Elsa. What they said there tonight—about Nate and his wife and me—was untrue. Lies—all of it! Do you believe that?”

Her eyes drew from the road ahead and looked up to meet his, somber and appealing. She smiled and nodded. A warm peace radiated over her, although all the evening dimmed through her tears.

“I believe it, Bay,” she murmured, as though she were telling herself something of which she had never before been quite sure.

CHAPTER XXII

In the days that followed, Elsa recalled again and again those last words Bayliss had spoken to Norbert Whitney. "The Carews settle!" Day after day, she watched the Carew men as they fought desperately, their backs to the wall, holding their enemies at bay while Reef and old Tom Dewing labored night and day, listing assets, drawing up papers, making endless adjustments while a snarling, ravenous pack waited outside the doors of their office in Hurley. "The Carews settle!" Day after day, she watched the Carew holdings melt away, like fields of snow under a warm sun, until nothing was left but the great white house that stood back from the road, at the end of an avenue of elms. "The Carews settle. . . ." She watched them all—old Seth Carew, broken now, a tragic figure as he walked the fields where he had reaped his harvests for years; Michael Carew, stubborn, sullen, profane; Joel Carew, home from the city, crestfallen and bewildered; even Mahlon Breen—all these she watched, moving through the days as if they were being driven by some power of will outside their own. She watched Bayliss, fighting silently, resolutely, unflinchingly. "The Carews settle. . . ." And behind them all, Elsa knew, sat Hildreth Carew, come fiercely back to life again, obdurate, arrogant, intolerant, driving the men under her relentless fury, forcing them to pay to their last dollar. Elsa had seen her but once during those terrible days. She hoped she might never see her again.

And now the end had come. Hildreth Carew had sent word to Bayliss and Elsa, summoning them to the big house for one last meeting of the family before Michael should leave for Texas. In the late afternoon they rode through the fields, Elsa mounted on Fleta, Bayliss riding a black colt that had been lately broken to the saddle.

Before them, as they entered the avenue of elms, the Carew house stood, dazzling white in the sunlight, topped with its brave green roof which to Elsa had always seemed remote from death, from decay, from any failing of the spirit. The light, elusive green of the tall elms curved tenderly against the blue, and on the inviolable smooth lawns the great bouquets of shrubbery made an unstudied pattern of beauty in vermilion and ambers and greens as faint as rain. Elsa drew in her breath sharply. Ruin had come to that great white house with its roof shining and triumphant in the sunlight, impervious to the rigors of the seasons.

She stole a glance at Bayliss. His head was lifted, his eyes narrowed. He seemed to be drawing in toward himself everything upon which he gazed. It was a look preoccupied, intent, arresting. She knew that he was totally unaware of her regard. A pang smote through her.

“Damnable, isn’t it, that the old place has to go?”

She heard his voice, aware of a new, hard quality in it. She murmured some reply, knowing that he was too absorbed to hear her.

The family had gathered in the library, through the windows of which the sun sent long searching shafts across the rich carpet and the massive table where Hildreth sat in serene brilliance. Elsa looked at her. It was the Hildreth of old who sat there, head held high, eyes alight, imperious. For many moments, then, Elsa did not see the others in the room; did not even see Hildreth. What she saw was Grace Carew, seated directly in the path of light, no longer in her severe mourning, but in a white silk dress and rocking slowly, measuredly to and fro, in her low chair. Elsa had closed her eyes for a second, almost dazed from the power of the illusion. She believed, in that instant that Grace was rosy and rounded, and that her hair was honey blond and arranged in an elaborate pompadour upon her head. When she looked again, what she saw was not the frail being of a month ago, with uncertain eyes and quivering hands, but a woman with a cheerful face and a strong, erect body. Whatever the change that had come over Grace Carew, there was nothing now to indicate any failing of the woman’s powers, mental or physical.

“Sit down here beside me, Elsa,” Hildreth said out of the quiet. “What’s Bayliss looking so glum about?”

Elsa sat down in the chair beside Hildreth, her eyes searching Bayliss’ face as he moved to the other side of the table. Nellie wheeled the tea wagon into the room, placing it so that the sunlight fell across it. In the steam rising from the quaint delft blue pot, in the little rich cakes on their blue plate, and in the fine sheen on the linen, Elsa thought there was a mellowness, an unruffled calm that was the very essence of Hildreth Carew herself.

Nellie’s two sons had followed their mother into the library. They went directly over to Bayliss, who had seated himself beside Michael. Elsa noted in the elder of the two children a striking resemblance to Bayliss. Her heart quickened with a deep blending of pain and sweetness.

“Send the boys out, Nellie,” Hildreth ordered in a voice that was all patience and control. “They’ll grow up soon enough.”

Nellie led the boys out and the elder one looked over his shoulder at Elsa and smiled roguishly.

From the door at the other end of the room, Seth Carew entered, quiet and gray, a faintly ironical smile playing about his lips. "Another council of war, eh, Hildreth?" he remarked as he seated himself and looked about the room. "You should have been a general."

He laughed gently, a laugh, Elsa thought, that sounded the depths of despair. In a moment he got up and seated himself a little apart from the others, in an alcove, beside an open window through which he could look out upon an apple tree that made a blossomy blur of the outer world. By his action he seemed to remove himself, not only from the group, but altogether from the life of which he had been a part. He laughed again, but now only to himself, as though at something deeply, prevailingly amusing.

Nellie had served tea. Hildreth drank two cups, calmly, deliberately, then set her teacup aside and folded her white hands in an attitude of resignation upon the black silk of her gown. Elsa, glancing quickly aside at her, saw that beneath the tragic mask of her face there shone the fierce, triumphant and perverse excitement in the catastrophes of the Carews—the same look she had seen there after the death of Peter. It was so baffling, so enigmatical, that Hildreth became, for the moment, a total stranger to her. Ruin? There could be no ruin where this woman lived. The very purpose of life burned in her. Of the wreckage about her she had already built a new stronghold within herself. She sat now, an erect, challenging figure, looking slowly about the room with her deep, not altogether human smile, an elfin irony lurking in her eyes.

"Michael," she began promptly, "will you tell us now just where we stand—after everything has been cleared up?"

Michael moved his chair close to the big table and drew a sheaf of papers from his pocket. For half an hour or more, Elsa listened to an account of how the Carew assets had been all but exhausted to meet the demands of the district. It was a harrowing story from first to last, and one the details of which Elsa did not even try to understand. While she listened, however, she realized how complete had been the collapse of the Carew fortunes. Even if she had not heard a word of what Michael said, she could have read the significance of his report in the tragic face of old Seth Carew. The old man sat, silent and unmoving, beside the open window, his eyes fixed upon the apple tree that was a pink-white cloud of blossoms.

When Michael had ended, Hildreth lifted her head quickly and squared her thin shoulders. "There is nothing in that report that we have not all heard, one way or another, before," she said. "It's just as well to have it all before us, however. You have known for days—all of you—that the family has reached the end of its resources. You probably know—all of you—that I have looked forward to such an hour as this for a long time."

Seth Carew looked around and lifted his hand toward her. "Don't go into that, Hildreth," he pleaded. "You can spare us something, surely."

She looked at him sharply. "I'm not going into that, Seth," she replied. "I'm saying that I have been expecting a crisis of this kind ever since this business was first mentioned. I opposed it from the first. I kept my own money out of it—and I kept Grace's money out of it. We have that still. It isn't much, but it will take us over the crisis, if we act wisely."

Elsa heard that same gentle laugh of Seth Carew's. She looked quickly at the old man. His eyes were still upon the apple tree, but an ironical smile played about the corners of his mouth.

Hildreth went into some details concerning the amount of money she and Grace had in their own names, and made a rough estimate of what might still be realized from the sale of household effects and the little livestock that still remained in the name of Seth Carew. But Elsa found it impossible to keep her mind on what Hildreth was saying. It was impossible to think of anything there except the fixed expression on Seth Carew's face. Hildreth might talk as she liked of carrying the family past the crisis. For Seth Carew, Elsa knew, there would be no passing this crisis. He had spilled his life out here, his spirit had already passed into the soil that was now no longer his.

"Grace and I have talked over the future," Hildreth went on in her hard, even tone. "We have discussed it with Nellie and the girls. We can't stay on here—you all know that. The ground is rotten under us. Whether we could rebuild the family fortunes is a question we need not consider. There is something more important than that." She cleared her throat and touched her long fingers to her lips. "We cannot allow Nellie's boys—and there will be other children to think of, too—we cannot allow them to grow up, bearing the name of Carew, when that name has become what our men have made of it in this district."

Her voice now was like snapping steel. None moved or dared to speak except Seth Carew, and he did no more than look around and lift his hand in meek protest.

“You will let me say what I have to say, Seth,” Hildreth went on, more resolute than ever. “When Peter brought disgrace——”

Seth was on his feet, his whole body trembling, his eyes blazing. “Stop it! I’ll not have it!” he roared. “You can say what you will of the living, but you’ll not call the dead to account.”

Bayliss got up and put his arm about his father’s shoulders. “Sit down, Father,” he said gently, urging him back into his chair.

When they were seated again, Hildreth went on. “Out of respect for your feelings, Seth, I’ll do as you wish. You ought to be told, however, that our neighbors have known the truth about Peter’s death—known it for a long time.”

“Let them—and be damned to them!” Seth said.

Hildreth continued as if Seth had not spoken. “Michael has never pretended to make any secret of his conduct. We don’t need to speak of that. It will do no harm, however, for Joel to know that his name is being mentioned quite freely in connection with the wife of Axel Fosberg.”

Elsa saw Joel color to the roots of his hair. Even for her the ordeal was becoming almost unbearable. But Hildreth seemed to have no feeling left for anyone.

“We all know what is being said of Bayliss and that wife of Brazell’s. I am not asking whether Bayliss was responsible for the death of Nate Brazell. I don’t want to know. All I want to say is that I can’t tolerate the thought of staying on where such things are believed and spoken of by people on every hand.”

“You’re working yourself up for nothing, Aunt Hild,” Bayliss broke out impatiently, looking up at her. “What they say about me can’t——”

But Hildreth was not to be reasoned with. “Nellie and the children and Ada are going at once to Texas—as soon as Michael and Nellie’s brother can arrange a place for them to stay. Grace and I are following as soon as we can put our affairs in order. What Florence and Mahlon may do is for them to decide. Seth has consented to accompany Grace and me when we leave. I am curious to know what Joel and Bayliss wish to do. When that is settled, we can put our plans to work.”

While Hildreth had been talking, Elsa had seen the pageant of the Carews passing before her eyes, down through the ages, a spectacle of brilliance, of rash knight-errantry, of romantic folly. Now, once again, the

pageant was moving. A quick fear gathered at her heart, drew her involuntarily away from Hildreth.

“First—Bayliss,” Hildreth said, after a pause. “I don’t wish to keep it a secret, Bayliss, that we expect you to come with us. It has always been the family’s luck to go from disaster to new success. There is nothing left for you here, Bayliss, except poverty and contempt. And nothing but humiliation for Elsa. I have never had a moment’s doubt as to what you would do, if a way out offered itself. Am I right?”

There was a heavy moment of silence during which Bayliss seemed to be seeking for a reply. In that moment, a sudden rush of images out of the past flashed sharply before Elsa’s mind: a day of brilliant August heat, with the smell of dust and hay in a barn loft, and a glittering equipage moving into the Bowers yard below; a brown November afternoon, a decade ago, when she had carried samples of her mother’s knitting to the Carew women, and had sat squirming on her chair, smarting under the cool stare of Ada Carew—“Do you wear those, El-sa?” And then, a sultry summer night, and the Carew women with an aloof, patronizing cordiality, receiving their humble guests in the haymow of the big Carew barn; and later, a heavy morning in this very room, when she had suffered the chill warmth of their reception of her as the wife of Bayliss. It was these people who were asking her to go with them now, to accept their defeat, to flee from their disgrace and take up life again in another world.

Bayliss had begun to speak, but Elsa felt herself getting from her chair and standing to an incredibly slim and conspicuous height before Hildreth—before Ada and Nellie and Florence and Grace—before Michael and Bayliss and Joel and Seth Carew, their father. Her body seemed to sway, and yet throughout her being there was a rigid core of resistance, the firm entity of Elsa Bowers. She looked across the room at Bayliss and her eyes held him as impersonally as though he had been a stranger. Her mind had never been so clear. Never, not even for Bayliss and all the strength of her love for him, would she follow that vainglorious pageant of the Carews.

“Bayliss may go—or stay—as he chooses,” she said clearly, and it seemed to her senses that a little door clicked shut after each word. “Whatever he does—I shall stay here.” She hesitated only for a fleet instant. “You may raise your children where you will—and how you will—but I will raise no children in the fear of the heritage of the Carews. . . .” Her voice became deeper and moved more slowly as she looked across at Bayliss and her eyes clung with his, seeing them narrowed and sharpened with amazement. “I don’t want a child of mine to be—a coward.”

She held her head high as she moved across the room to the hall door. “You will feel better if you can discuss this without me,” she said steadily. “I have said all I can say. I’m going home, Bayliss.”

Fleta took the road home without guidance. Elsa, alone on the road, realized that she must have run out of the house. The whole landscape before her was crazy with tears that were fire in her eyes. Some monstrous power seemed to be closing upon her, dragging her back, that she might witness with her own eyes the family’s devouring of Bayliss. She saw herself living on in the Hollow without him, her mind and heart a dead garden where he had been.

The sun was setting in a nebula of flame when she rode into the yard below the barn. She turned Fleta into the pasture and then ran to the house. It had come upon her suddenly that she need have no fear for Bayliss; he would come to her here on the Mountain where all manner of fair things were.

She had come to the crest of the Mountain now and above her the sky was pellucid and green, naked save for the slender silver bauble of the new moon. The air about her seemed tangible to her fingers, seemed drenched with the sweetness of new and delicate growth. The Mountain flowed downward, a somber downward streaming of earth, and against that flow Bayliss was pressing on upward toward her.

Now he was passing by the budding, tender birches, waving his hat to her. She had been sitting upon a little grassy hummock that was still warm from the heat that had lain upon it all day. She rose now, and her pale dress undulated faintly about her limbs in the warm stir of air. She knew that he could see that waving motion of her gown. That was enough. She did not wave to him, nor call to him. She stood still with her arms behind her head, looking down the side of the Mountain.

He mounted the last grassy knoll slowly, with long strides. She could see little facets of reddish light on the bright leather of his riding boots. The same reddish light outlined the ridge of hair above his forehead, and tinged his cheekbones. Now he was on the crest of the Mountain, smiling dimly at her. She moved toward him and put up her hands to his face, drawing his head down so that she could touch the gleam on his hair with her lips, and the ruddy patch on each of his cheekbones. Then she felt him draw her close with abrupt violence, and in the hurt of his kiss she saw that his eyes were bleak and distraught.

He laughed gloomily. "I'm here, you see. You knew I'd come. You didn't think for a second that I'd go with them. Not for a second. You—you were right."

She hid her face against his shoulder and could not speak for a long time. At last she said, "I should have died, Bay—really died."

"I'm the poorest man in the Hollow, Elsa," he said after a while. "You might just as well have married——"

She put her hand over his mouth. "Don't you say that, Bayliss," she cried, "ever!"

He went on dully. "I'm stripped—almost nothing left except this hill—and it's yours. But I couldn't have stood it any other way. We're of the Hollow now, for sure."

Elsa laughed with a sudden unaccountable happiness and caught his arm. "I'm glad, Bay, glad! Do you forget who I am?"

They were both of the Hollow, now, then. She and Bayliss. . . . Her thoughts halted after the momentary rush of joy. Could Bayliss *ever* be part of the Hollow? Would he ever be anything but a Carew, ingrained . . . Peter, still alive? A remote sadness came upon her. She strengthened herself against it, and knew that in its place had come a dim acceptance of what was to be. She felt strong and cool and unafraid. Inexplicably, she thought of Hildreth Carew, as though she had suddenly come to stand beside her here on the Mountain.

Bayliss spoke again.

"Come—let's sit down here and talk and laugh a little. We've had enough woe for a while."

She seated herself on the grassy hummock and Bayliss stretched out before her, his head resting on his hands. They were silent for a time, then Bayliss asked abruptly, "Did you mean anything—anything in particular—when you said that this afternoon—about your children?"

Elsa laughed tenderly at him, and gathered his hair into her hands. "Are one's dreams anything—anything in particular?" she asked him.

"Everything," he told her.

"I have dreamed—again and again—of a—a boy—with hair cropping up exactly like yours—and a sulky groove between his eyes—just like this—and funny eyebrows, like blackish minnows."

She let her eyes dream past him, down far into the Hollow where color ebbed and flowed about the foot of the Mountain now in faint, lingering waves. She knew that his eyes were upon her tensely, but she pretended not to know. Suddenly he caught her hands and pressed them to his eyes. She heard his voice, and the tremble in it, but deeper down a strength that frightened her.

“And I have dreamed, too. I have dreamed your dream, Elsa—and another that is my own.”

“Tell me.”

“I once spoke to you about doing something with the Hollow. Do you remember? And do you remember how angry you got about it?”

Slowly, as though she had had her ear to the ground and had heard distant thunder, a new knowledge entered her mind, a knowledge vague at first, then increasingly sharp, until at last it stood out stark and unrelieved, a burning symbol in her brain. Alarm flashed through her like an illuminating flame.

Bayliss was speaking once more. “It will take years, dear—but I want to do it—I want to do it.”

Her eyes filled suddenly with tears. Bayliss’ dream . . . the dream of a Carew! “It will take years,” he had said. She thought of that. Child of hers, then, would come to know the Hollow as she had known it. That other being, with the tinge and the contour of Bayliss, but with a soul that was half Elsa Bowers, would come to know that shallow palm of the earth where the lazy brown creek was, and the rotten, ancient smell of waters at the flood, and deep down the ivory tentacles of old roots, and above, the dipping blade of a nighthawk’s wing. After that, what would it matter?

The light had fallen into a blue pool below them, the sky doming above in dusky sapphire was spurred with the white of May stars. Bayliss drew her into his arms, where she lay in an indolent rapture, drugged by the swift warmth of his body, luxuriating in his strength and cleanness. The outline of his head against the luminous dark stirred her intolerably; she drew him suddenly down to her and kissed him with all her strength. She felt herself gathered in toward him sensationally, into the throb of oblivion. . . .

The little frail moon had vanished now and there was no wind in all the darkness on the Mountain. Elsa held up her hand, spreading the fingers fanwise to see how many stars they could be made to darken. But Bayliss caught the hand and kissed each finger separately.

After a time Elsa trailed her fingers in the grass beside her; there was dew on it. She had been with Bayliss a long time on the Mountain.

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.

Book name and author have been added to the original book cover. The resulting cover is placed in the public domain.

[The end of *The Mad Carews* by Martha Ostenso]