

The EXILE

Theirs was a romantic marriage but it took them a long time to discover that love does not feed on selfishness

By BERYL GRAY

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The Exile

by

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Of course Carolyn Conway knew, from the very beginning, that there was no real excuse for it. Not for a girl brought up as she had been. The Conways had had little money, certainly not in this generation but they had breeding, and they could trace their ancestry with pride as far as anyone would care to listen. It was expected naturally that Carolyn, with all her poise and charm, would marry someone of substantial worth with a background similar to her own.



It was certainly not expected that she would choose to marry anyone like Slim Graham. Although, as Carolyn tried vainly to point out, Slim was different. It wasn't Slim's fault if he was largely untaught. He came from the great spaces of the cattle country, where ranches were casually separated by dozens of miles; and schools in consequence, few and scattered. If Slim had been given advantages, there was no knowing what he might have done. He had a fine, intelligent young face, and a physique and carriage that were almost classic in perfection.

Carolyn had met Slim on a holiday. She had come with friends to a guest ranch in the Middle West. Slim had come riding in one night, on business. He had stayed to join them on the wide verandah in a rousing chorus. Carolyn had watched him as he sat on the top step. He wore a blue silk shirt, knotted yellow silk tie, spurs, boots and breeches, and he held a wide-brimmed hat across his knees. His bright yellow head was flung back, and he sang with unself-conscious, deep enjoyment. More than once he had looked across at her and smiled as if the slender, white-clad girl, still city pale and with the soft black Spanish hair, were something that had formed out of the mists of a dream.

Somehow it had seemed simple and natural for them to wander away from the others in the moonlight. It was a night of almost magical radiance. They moved beneath unimaginable points of stars in a blue-black sky, and with the outline of dusky, rolling hills all around. They said very little. Slim did not even touch her—and though few young men walked with her in moonlight without touching her, she did not want him to. But they both knew that they were indescribably happy.

Slim broke the silence as they turned back toward the ranch.

“Can you ride?” he asked, and she laughed softly.

“You'd think it was funny, if you saw me.”

“I sure wouldn't.” His young face was earnest. “Miss Conway, I reckon you'd sit real pretty on a horse.”

If the “real pretty” grated ever so slightly on Carolyn's sensitive ears, the spell of moonlight still enfolded her. She only caught the compliment beneath, and again she laughed.

“I don't feel pretty when she trots.”



Slim tossed back his shining yellow hair and laughed too, as if delighted that, though a dream, this girl could prove to be companionable.

“Sure, but that’s just practice,” he assured her. “You’d soon toughen up. Say, Miss Conway, I don’t want to act in a pushing manner, but I could soon show you how to ride.”

That was the beginning—and more than once, as days went by, uneasiness touched Carolyn’s mind. It was madness, she knew, that she could not sleep at nights for thinking of a blond, untutored cowboy. She must let him know, quite plainly, that he must not continue to look at her as—well, as men in all walks of life looked at women when deep emotions stirred them.

And she found she could not let him know. Not until that evening, just at sunset, when they sat, among grass that was still green and waving in the

breeze, high on a hill. There were flowers on that hill, tiny, hardy flowers, yellow and pink and mauve and blue—and all around, stretching into infinite distance beneath the deep blue and gold of the sunset sky, were rolling hills that took on just the same soft hues. She sat, breathless with the marvel of such beauty, while Slim picked the flowers about them, one by one. With his innate knowledge of wild things, he handed them to her, telling something of their growth and origin. And then suddenly he looked at her. His fingers, closed about a flower as deep blue as his eyes, were poised in mid-air.

“Carolyn”—he spoke with characteristic directness—“I reckon you know I want you badly.”

The magic of the hilltop faded from Carolyn’s dark eyes. She was quite unafraid, for she had long been aware of her own attractions and she knew very well, by many glances and half-shy touches in those last few days, that Slim had a good deal on his mind. But Slim had always shown a real if rough courtesy, and she had not expected anything quite so unvarnished. A deep color stole up under her new glowing tan.

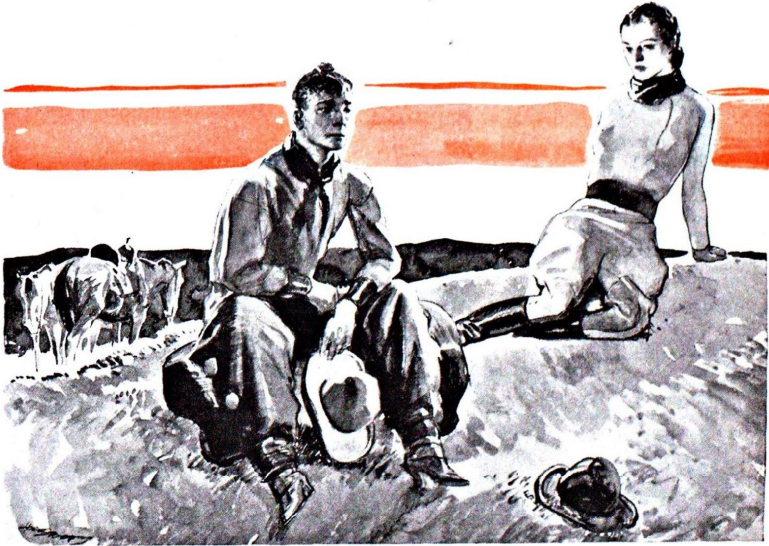
“Slim! I haven’t given you any right to talk like that!”

His blue eyes still met hers. “I know,” he admitted. Although his voice was low, it did not hold the embarrassment she had expected. “But I consider I can offer you a good deal, Carolyn. I’ve got my own land and two thousand head of cattle.”

“Cattle!” She looked amazed. “What has cattle to do with it?”

“Well, I reckon it’s got a lot to do with the way I can keep you when we’re married.”

"You mean — marry you? Slim, is that . . ." She broke off, knowing suddenly that it was she who had offered the insult.



“Married!” The surprise deepened, for, oddly, that was the one thing she had not anticipated. Somehow their worlds had seemed so infinitely distant, it had been inconceivable that they could ever meet on such a plane. She was reduced to incoherent astonishment. “You mean—marry you? Slim, is that what you meant when you said . . .?” She broke off, knowing suddenly that that was just what he had meant, and that *she* was offering the insult!

“Why, sure; what else?” Slim stared and then slowly a dull red crept up from his neck to the roots of his hair. “My gosh, I wouldn’t want you”—the flower was crushed in his strong brown hand, and his voice dropped to a note that was almost inaudible—“any other way.” At the same time he flung himself, chest downward, on the grass. He turned his face so that she would not see the crimson embarrassment there.

In that moment Carolyn forgot all the things she had been taught; things having to do with education, culture, and proper social contact. Just then they seemed negligible against a fineness and a cleanness such as she had never dreamed of. She saw herself in that revealing moment as something so spoiled by artificial sophistry that she could not even recognize inherent goodness when it was offered to her in simplicity—and the thought was shameful. Rare, stinging tears came to her eyes. Her hand touched the bright gold hair, and stayed there.

“Slim!” It was barely more than a choked whisper. “Forgive me, for not understanding.”

Slim sat up, and he caught her hand between both of his. “Carolyn, I’m dumb, the way I talk.” His voice was apologetic. “I—I reckon I don’t know how to ask a woman things.”

A shaken thread of laughter escaped her. “You, you certainly do, Slim. You know how to say it with cattle!”

He laughed too, even if he did not altogether understand, and his grip lightened about her hand. It was unthinkable madness and yet Carolyn was oddly powerless. She wanted to see those clear blue eyes looking into hers, and to hear the eager, stumbling young voice.

“Cattle sure, I know. But I ought to tell you other ways—ways that would mean something, and you’d remember. Ways like—like when I look at those hills, and all this country I’ve always lived in, and I feel it here because it’s part of me!” Unconsciously, he put his hand over his heart, and his face was alight with something she had seen in the face of no man before. His voice dropped. “I feel that way about you, Carolyn.”

And that was the thing she had tried to tell them when she married Slim—and knew she could never put into adequate, revealing words. That was the thing that took her from the city, and left her on a cattle ranch.

That was the thing that held her—until she was held with other things. Things that were more tangible, like Barney who came in the second year of their marriage, and Paula two years later. Carolyn was not unhappy at first. Even if she soon found that she and Slim had not a thing in common beyond their splendid youth and love, there was much to keep her occupied. She liked to ride. She found a fascination in the changing colors of the hills and plains, and the constant move of cattle. She found the ranchmen a rugged, interesting type. The ranch house was solid and well furnished in a rough, pioneering way. It was fun at first to run up fresh white curtains where curtains had rarely hung; to make gay cushions which cheered austere rooms, and to paint brightly woodwork that had never known a touch of artificial color. It was amusing to try to extract music from the old dusty organ, and to sit and sew by the lamp which daily Slim pumped up by hand. It all still seemed in the nature of an entertaining dream; a dream from which she could step aside whenever she chose.

Reality closed in soon enough. It closed in during winter, when snow lay deep about; when communication was often blocked, radio not at its best, and her companion a man good and kind, but who knew nothing of books or art or finer music. A man who thought Northwest adventure stories the height of literature, and cowboy laments the prettiest tunes imaginable.

Moreover, Slim took his Northwest adventure stories solemnly. He would turn the well-thumbed pages over and over, “Gol’darn, that Double Gun Joe has what it takes!” he would declare, and read to her laboriously. At first, hopefully, she tried to read in turn to him from magazines which appealed to her own intellect. Slim listened but he would shake his yellow head in frank bewilderment and disapproval.

“Well, all I got to say is, a fellow like him just don’t know how to act decent. A wife’s a wife, and he ought to remember that.”

“But can’t you see!” Sometimes, a little desperately, Carolyn tried to argue the point. “Her mind was so narrow, she stifled him. He needed room to expand. The other woman understood.”

“Well, maybe, but I think she was just plain wrong in her nature. She ought to have left him alone. And those folk ought to have had some kids to keep them occupied.”

“Oh, Slim!” She put the book down in despair. But a reflective smile played about his finely cut lips.

“You know, it’s going to be mighty fine when we hear some kids racketing around this old house again, Carolyn.”

“I wonder.” She sounded oddly doubtful. But she soon gave up, for the time being at least, the thought of higher education where Slim was concerned, and after a while she was able to turn her thoughts to Barney. Barney came the second winter during a snowstorm, before the doctor could arrive. Thanks to Slim and one of the men—both of whom seemed to know more of such things than she. Barney came with rough but hygienic care into the world. For all of that, it was a nightmare she did not soon forget.

“This will never happen again!” she panted once, in those long, suffering hours.

Slim patted her clenched hand reassuringly. “Now, don’t you get upset. My mother raised ten of us safely, and they were all born in this room. In those days, no one thought of doctors.”

“This is a modern age, and I was a fool to get out of it!” She twisted furiously away, and Slim’s unfailing care and patience meant little to her then. But a good deal later, he sat by her side, with her hand in his, and he brought up the subject himself, a little shyly.

“Now, honest, Carolyn, wouldn’t you rather have a fellow who didn’t go getting all scared and soft, like in those stories you were reading. We got you through—and I reckon you and the kid mean as much to me as you’d mean to one of those lily-fingered lizards.”

“Oh, shut up.” She had to laugh, weakly, because the tears were close, and because Slim’s lean young face was far whiter than he would ever have admitted. She reached up and touched his cheek gently. “You’re good, Slim.” Her eyes moved down to the tiny, red-faced bundle at her side. “He’s like you.” Slowly, new worry filled her pale, tired face. “Slim, I’ve always planned such a lot for my son, and we’re so far from the world out here. We’ve simply got to do something when it’s time for him to go to school.”

“School!” Slim just looked at her and laughed. “Say, we’ve got to make a cowboy and a rider out of this fellow, too. But I’m not losing any sleep over it just yet. Suppose you wait a while before you start worrying about a little thing like schools.”

The worry returned in full force two years later, when Paula came. It deepened as Barney started to talk with a constant rush of chatter, and often his speech was not of the purest. Carolyn had endured Slim’s lack of finely turned phrases because it was the only subject on which he had shown definite resentment.

“Carolyn, I reckon I’ll do just about anything you ask,” he told her once, quite frankly. An unusual red burned underneath his clear brown skin. “But maybe you say things, too, that get me—and I don’t kick. You go ahead and talk your way, and I’ll talk the way I always learned things. Then we’ll call it square.”

“That’s stubborn!” Anger flashed into her eyes. “There’s only one way to talk that’s right.”

“Then why is it your way, any more than mine?”

That was a trifle difficult. “Because educated people in thousands, the whole world over, talk as I do,” she defended.

Before she could go on, Slim came right back, with a capacity for argument she had not yet encountered. “And thousands talk the same way I

do. Those guys who write Northwest adventures—they're educated, and they know how real outdoor fellows act and talk.”

“That’s because they write down to ignorant minds.” That was a sharp, uncalled-for retort, and Carolyn knew it, with immediate shame. But even then Slim was a match for her.

“Well then, your educated mind took a big fall when you met me.” For an instant his blue eyes met hers with direct challenge. “What’s more, even if you don’t like my ways, they’re still mine, and you’d better leave me alone.” With that curt finale, he walked away.

Naturally, to Carolyn, that was simply blind stubbornness. She did, however, have the sense to close her eyes to a lot of things she did not like in Slim, because in other ways he was so kind and unfailingly good-natured. And that saved the first years of their marriage.

But what she had to endure in Slim, she would not suffer in her children. It was quite a different matter to have young Barney look at her with solemn blue eyes, and declare: “I *can* say it that way if I want! My daddy does.” Mealtimes, in consequence, became times of correction; largely because Carolyn hoped, by indirect pressure, to make Slim understand the difficulties she was up against. The children squirmed on their chairs in the big, old-fashioned kitchen, impatient of the constant curbing of their chatter. Slim would sit, steadily eating, as if he did not even hear.

The climax came when Barney was six, and he looked across the table at his father, with appealing eyes.

“Daddy, I don’t want to be a little gentleman. I want to be a damn good guy like you!”

Slim glanced up at Carolyn, and then looked quickly at Barney with an expression that tried to be severe. Then suddenly, because he could not help it, he flung back his handsome yellow head and roared with laughter. Barney jumped up in his chair and shouted until his golden curls danced with the vibration, while Paula banged her spoon down on her thick white plate and shrieked “damn good guy” with gleeful abandon. Carolyn rose with crimson face, and with one look that Slim would not soon forget, bore a kicking and protesting child under each arm, from the room.

That was a stormy evening for Carolyn and Slim, with tears and fury on one side, and defiant scorn and fury on the other. It ended—for that one night—when Slim apologized reluctantly, and she submitted silently to his stiff conciliatory kiss. It ended more definitely, a week later, when one night

she put her arms around him and said she'd never forget his kindness in saying she could live in the city during school months—while he just nodded, and sat for some time on the edge of the bed in a silence she could not break.

She was almost happy again that last summer before Barney was to go to school, and she would not let herself believe that Slim's natural gaiety was forced or subdued. She let Barney spend every possible moment with his father, and she rarely checked him in Slim's hearing. Somehow she felt she owed them both that; and Barney could be corrected later. But new problems came toward the last, when more than once Barney broke into a storm of tears and said he would not go away unless his dad could go as well.

"Son, I can't," Slim explained patiently, over and over. "I can't leave the ranch to look after itself."

"You could rent the ranch, like old Mr. Morton did when he was sick and had to go away," Barney persisted. And he twisted in his arms, to look at his mother with new hope breaking out on his distressed little face. "Mother, couldn't he?"

It was an idea that, strangely enough, had not occurred to Carolyn before. But all at once, perversely, she would not admit that. She spoke, instead, with more than a touch of the bitterness that rose whenever Barney clung to Slim so frantically. It was unfair of both Slim and Barney, in the face of all she was trying to do!

"Yes, of course he could, dear," she responded smoothly. "But you couldn't expect him to want to leave his ranch just for us."

The "just for us" must have held a touch of something that passed over Barney's head. For, even while he stared up at his father in wondering disbelief, Slim's face grew dark and red. Slowly he put the child down, and his eyes narrowed.

"Oh. So that's what you've been thinking of me, is it? Well, maybe I've been thinking too, and you won't have cause to say I can't look after you. Son, don't you worry." He patted the boy's curly head before he turned away. "I may surprise you yet."

It was a turn of events Carolyn had not expected when Slim announced, a few days later, that he had closed a five-year agreement concerning his land and cattle, and was going with them to the city.

Carolyn stared in frank dismay. “But, Slim, whatever will you do there?”

He looked surprised. “I’m still young and strong. I reckon I can do plenty.”

“But you haven’t been trained.”

“I’ve got hands, haven’t I?” He stretched out a brown, capable arm, and clenched his fist. “And I’ve got a mind.” After a minute, as she did not speak, he added slowly, “I reckon you don’t even consider I’ve got a mind.”

“Slim, don’t be silly!” Slim’s direct method of meeting any argument often made her feel helplessly wrong, even when quite sure that she was right. “It’s just—you’re so used to it here. You’d hate to leave.”

“Well, I don’t figure I’m so weak-kneed I can’t stand up to it. Say, what’s the matter, anyway?” he demanded. “You sort of look at me as if you don’t want me along.”

“Oh, you and your ideas!” She tried to laugh because Slim looked oddly young and frightened, and laughter was something he understood. “Of course I want you.”

Of course she did. But now she was no longer happy. She felt oppressed, and she could not honestly blame Slim for that either. Slim did not once complain or look resentful. Under his guidance, everything moved capably and serenely, and the night came when they were all packed to go.

That evening after supper, she sent him out to the pump for water; and at dusk she found him still sitting on the wooden top of the well, just staring at the empty bucket held between his knees. He looked up quickly as she approached and took the bucket from him.

“I’m sorry.” His smile was apologetic. “I reckon I forgot the water. I was sitting here thinking how plumb lazy I’ve been, when I might have rigged you up a water tank and pipes into the kitchen.”

“Slim!” Suddenly Carolyn’s arm was tight about his shoulder, over the faded blue shirt. She was seeing, instead of this sober-eyed young man, a boy who had ridden into her life one night in bright blue and yellow silk, and jangling spurs, and with a wide-brimmed hat on his blond head. Seeing a boy who had sat high on a hilltop, saying simply, “I feel it here because it’s part of me.”

“Slim!” Her voice was choked. “Don’t—don’t talk about water tanks. *I’m* so selfish. I shouldn’t let you go.”

The smile held. “You couldn’t stop me.” Then, as he saw the tears in her eyes, he reached out with both arms and held her. “Carolyn, I only want you to say you’ll come back here with me some day.” There was appeal both in his eyes and in his low voice.

“Of course.” Her fingers passed through the thick bright hair. Slim was still so young and clean and strong. It was not Slim’s fault, but only his environment, if there were finer things he lacked. “You make me feel as if I were killing something you loved.”

His eyes met hers a moment. “Maybe you are,” he agreed. Then an odd, slightly shaken laugh escaped him. “Aw, shucks, I didn’t mean that. Gosh, Carol, you and the kids mean so much to me, I guess I just couldn’t get along without you. Now don’t you worry.” Both his grip and his laugh grew stronger. “Maybe they do some queer things in your kind of books or life; but to my way of thinking, married folk just naturally stick together.”

Five years later they were still in the city. They lived in a comfortable suburban home. Slim—now known as Ted in company—had an interest in the corner service station. As Slim had said, he had hands and could learn to use them. And he had had sufficient mind to put some of his cattle profits into a growing business.

They had a piano and a radio. They had a washing machine and a good car. Carolyn belonged to several women’s organizations, and Slim had weekly lodge meetings. Carolyn resolutely tried to suppress the knowledge that Slim’s friends were not the sort she would have chosen, and that he stood out awkwardly, or not at all, among the friends she preferred. She tried to remember instead that Slim was a good, sober provider, a kind husband and father; and as long as she left him alone to work around the garage or garden as he chose, he let her go her own way without protest.

There were, of course, constant little storm clouds. Under the circumstances, they were almost inevitable. Sometimes they gathered swiftly, without warning. As on the occasion of Slim’s birthday, five years after their move to town. Supper that night had commenced quite happily, with Paula and her best friend, Rosie, in high spirits over the extra delicacies on the table. Young Davey, who had arrived eighteen months before, was sitting in his high chair, waving his spoon and shouting gaily to his father across the room.

Slim wore his good grey suit and a clean blue shirt, because they were obviously expected of him on such a festive night. His fair hair, still as thick

but not so brightly yellow, was brushed straight back, and his face, which was thin now rather than lean, was freshly shaven. He was carefully carving the chicken, when Barney dashed into the room with a brown paper parcel underneath his arm.

“I didn’t mean to be late.” He included them all in his cheerful grin. “I was hunting dad a birthday present.” He thrust the parcel at the side of Slim’s plate. “I bet you’ll like it, dad.”

“You do, do you?” Slim put down the carving knife with an answering smile. Urged on by the children’s clamor, he untied the string. Barney, alive with eagerness, pointed with an exultant finger. His handsome young face, beneath the yellow wavy hair, was alight.

“See, they’re Northwest adventure magazines, dad! Look at the bear clawing up that man. I bet you’ll get a kick out of them.”

Slim looked down at the boldly portrayed cover. Then he looked down the length of the table at Carolyn. His blue eyes were a little doubtful. Carolyn smiled back reassuringly.

“How exciting, Ted. You haven’t seen one of those for a long time.”

“I remembered you used to like them back on the ranch.” Barney broke in triumphantly. “That was pretty smart to remember, wasn’t it?”

“You bet it was.” Slim’s smile broadened as he looked up at the boy. “Do you remember the ranch, Barney?” he added.

“Sure, I remember. You always used to say we’d go back some summer, dad.”

Slim continued to look at his son. “How would you like it, if we did that, Barney?” He spoke, as he usually spoke now, carefully, but there was undeniable curiosity in his voice. Carolyn’s face, which still retained much of its girlhood loveliness, looked a trifle less serene. Slim had had these moments less often with the passing of the years, but she was never quite sure where they might lead.

“Sure, it would be keen,” Barney responded easily. “I’d certainly like to ride a horse. Boy, would I have something to tell the kids when I got back to school again!”

Slim hesitated. “You wouldn’t like to stay all year and just take home schooling, I reckon?” It was an experimental question. But before Barney could answer, Paula piped up with the importance brought on by her own high marks in school.

“Mother, he said ‘I reckon’ again. You know you said—”

“Hush,” said Carolyn promptly, silencing the child with a frown. “This is daddy’s birthday.”

“Sure it is, and I reckon he can say what he wants.” Barney spoke with deliberate emphasis, and he struck an attitude so virile that one would not have suspected him of invariably leading his classes. “How do you like your books, dad?”

“Oh fine, fine.” Slim’s voice was subdued in contrast. “I’d better get on with this chicken.”

“But you’ll read them, won’t you?”

“Sure.”

“My mother was mad when my brother brought home some books like that.” Rosie lifted her voice in shrill desire to be heard. “She says only people who don’t know any better read that kind of trash.”

Paula’s round eyes sparkled with a mixture of anger and defense. “My daddy was a real live cowboy. That’s why he doesn’t read proper books,” she explained. “Cowboys are so busy with cows and lassoes and horses, they haven’t got time to learn city things.”

Slim suddenly picked up the books. He flung them with infuriated skill to a chair across the room. “See what you’ve started, bringing me the cursed things!” he said harshly. Barney slipped into his chair, and his face was as red as his father’s. Slim did not look up from his plate, or speak again, until the conclusion of the meal.

Then abruptly he rose, and his eyes met Carolyn’s with relentless force.

“What’s more, you might as well remember the lease on my place is up next month, and if I say we’re going back—we’re just going!” he announced flatly. “You may consider I’m like dirt about this house, but I’m boss and you might as well know it!” Without a backward glance, he strode out of the room and house.

For a moment no one spoke, and only Davey laughed into the silence, undisturbed. The little girls looked frightened, and Barney, for all of his eleven years, seemed close to tears.

“Mother, I didn’t know it was wrong to bring home those books.”

“Of course it wasn’t wrong.” Carolyn tried to smile, chiefly because she did not want Rosie to bear home awkward tales. “Dad’s just a little tired and worried. Come along everyone, what about this fine supper?”

“But mother . . .” Presently Barney’s fork was held in mid-air and his young face was troubled. “I don’t think we ought to go back, out in the wilds again. Not if I’m going to be a doctor.”

“Don’t worry about it now. There’s a good boy.”

Something in Carolyn’s voice must have startled Paula.

“Mother, I don’t want to leave my school and Rosie!” The little girl broke into wailing protest. “I don’t see why daddy says he’s boss. It’s always what *you* say.”

“Hush, Paula. You know we have to do what daddy says, and we know he’ll do what’s best.” Carolyn spoke soothingly and unconvincingly, and she hoped that Rosie’s bright eyes would not see the color that had filled her face. With added ingenuity she managed to divert the conversation, and the meal went on serenely.

Carolyn was less serene that night as she lay in bed, waiting for Slim. She was frankly nervous of their future welfare. Slim could go on, reasonably and with an even temper, for months, and then he could be obstinate and irrational to a perplexing degree. If Slim should make up his mind, he could never be swayed by direct attack.

That was obvious when he came in. He was hatless, and his face was tired and cold, as if he had been walking a long time in the chill night air.

“Well.” He leaned with folded arms across the lower bed rail. His eyes were narrowed and inalienable. “So you think you’re all set to fight me.”

Carolyn laid down the magazine she could not read. “No, Slim.”

“What do you mean, no?”

“Just—no. I’m not going to argue.”

The resistance perceptibly increased. “You mean you just think you won’t do as I say?”

She shook her head. “I mean, you’re the head of this house, Slim.” Her voice was gentle. “The whole thing rests with you.”

Slim stared, almost as if he did not understand. But he did understand, although he could not have ever put it into words. He knew that by having

the reins placed in his hands, he was less able to go his own way than ever. For what he might be goaded into doing obdurately, he could not do in selfishness and unopposed.

Then he came and sat heavily on the edge of the bed. The stiffness had left his face, leaving it sober and with accentuated tiredness. "I guess it was just talk. You don't have to worry, Carolyn."

She touched his arm gently. She could afford to be genuinely gentle now. "Slim dear, you know this life is a good and comfortable one. You're not really so unhappy."

He shifted, just out of reach of her arm, and stared unswervingly downward. "You all think I'm something you want to keep out of sight." He spoke with unusual harshness.

"Slim, that's nonsense!" Her indignation was real, for that accusation, to her way of thinking, was unjust.

"It isn't nonsense." After a silence, he traced imaginary crosses on his knee, carefully. The harshness had dropped a little. "Barney—he's a swell kid all right, but he only gave me those books because he knew—the sort I am. He doesn't read that stuff himself."

"He thought he was giving you pleasure." Carolyn spoke with soft reproach. "You hurt him too, Slim."

"Well, I'm sorry about that," he admitted finally, just when she thought he would not answer at all. "I'll square him tomorrow, if I can."

"Of course you can." She spoke briefly in her relief, for there was no defiance left in Slim's voice now. "You can make a point of reading them when he's around."

"Sure. I can do that. But I reckon—I guess—it won't give me much pleasure."

"You don't mean because of what those silly children said!"

"No. Not that. Because—it's as if I was a ghost hanging around somewhere where I can't get in," he said painfully and thickly, and rose sharply to his feet. He began a desperate search for his pyjamas and dressing gown. "Aw, never mind. I guess I'm tired." He thrust her aside, and shut the bathroom door behind him.

But before they went to sleep that night, she put her arm around him. "Slim," she whispered, "you know I love you." And it was true. There was

something in Slim that had not grown shabby with the years, and she knew it was a quality she might not have found, even in men with a background similar to her own.

“Slim,” she went on softly, as he did not stir. “Some day, when the children are grown, I’ll go back with you.”

After a moment he just reached up and patted her hand. “Poor Carolyn,” he said quietly, and somehow she found there was nothing more to be said. Tears that went deeper than self-pity, stung her eyelids. Slim knew much more than she had ever tried to tell him, and perhaps it was hard to tell which of them had suffered more. The old, old story of two basically decent, struggling people caught in the web of a mismatched marriage.

So another five years passed. Barney was a tall, fine boy, glowing with vitality. Sometimes Carolyn’s pride turned to uneasiness when she watched him. Barney was so much like Slim had been; and there was no gay spontaneity in Slim now. He went about his business pleasantly and quietly. His hair, still thick, held more than a touch of grey, and he wore his clothes in company well enough to escape attention. He spoke with the same direct simplicity, but he no longer uttered glaring solecisms, and rarely said “I reckon.” Perhaps he alone knew the effort that had taken. And Carolyn hated the neighboring woman who once had told her that her husband had the loveliest smile, so kind and yet so sad.

There had been comparatively few storms in those years. Now and then, after months of peace, Slim would rise to a few hours of anger over some trifle. Then, after an added period of almost unshakable silence, things would go on as before. The storm that came one January night when Barney was just sixteen, was as swift and unforeshadowed as the others.

Slim came in late that evening, tired and cold after hours of turning stiff motors and replacing exhausted batteries. He was in need of food and warmth and quiet. Carolyn was upstairs in the bath. The dining room was full of noisy boys and Paula was struggling with homework in the kitchen. Paula, who looked too tall and delicate for her age, sighed with despair.

“Dad, I wish you knew something about mathematics. I’m so tired I can’t get anything done.”

Slim patted her shoulder with a chilled hand. “Paula, be a good girl and go to bed. You’ll feel brighter in the morning.”

She jerked away. "Dad, don't touch me. You're cold. You don't understand. These things are important."

"Not so important as your health." Slim moved to the stove to draw the kettle nearer to the flame. "I'll make some cocoa." Then he frowned a little at an additional shout from the other room. "Who's in there?"

"Some friends of Barney's. I wish you'd make them stop. My head aches terribly."

"I'll close the door." Slim left the room and moved down the hall. He was halted by an added roar of mirth.

"Gosh, look at that shirt and tie!" Three or four boys were going through a pile of old pictures on the dining-room table. "He was the genuine thing, all right. Say, that horse must have been a real bucking bronc!"

"Sure. Can you wonder that my mother fell for that rangeland romance stuff," Barney spoke with light amusement. "Just shows the way women will go for a good-looking guy in a colorful rigout. I understand the good old family just about went into a convulsion when their carefully raised darling went and picked her a wild man from the open spaces."

"I'll bet they did." The laughter increased. Then suddenly the laughter died from Barney's face, as Slim strode across the room.

"Give me that picture!"

"Why sure, sure." Barney stepped back uneasily. "But you don't have to snatch it."

"And don't talk back to me, or I'll give you some wild-man stuff right now."

"You'd better not try," Barney said grimly.

"I hadn't, eh. I'll show you who can give orders around here."

"Dad, don't shout!" Barney's face was red with more than anger.

"Who's shouting?" When Carolyn rushed down in her dressing gown, the visiting boys were making an unobtrusive exit, and Slim and Barney were facing each other savagely.

"Keep out of the way." Barney held her back. "He's not going to insult me before my friends!"

"It's too bad about insulting him." Slim's face, too, was crimson, "You can go ahead any time and insult me, and it's all right."

“Slim!” Carolyn came close, but he swung fiercely about.

“Leave me alone. I’ve stood for all this long enough, and one day I’m going to get out. I’ll go back and lead my own life, and you won’t stop me!” He strode across the room and slammed the door. A moment later they heard the bedroom door slam too.

“Phew!” Barney whistled, as Paula slid in, pale and frightened, to join them. “That was a hot one! Wonder how long it’ll take him to cool off this time.”

Carolyn looked at the scattered photos on the table. “Barney, what on earth happened?”

Barney explained, still resentfully. “I don’t see why he has to take things the way he does.”

“I don’t see why you have to either,” Carolyn flashed back. She was in truth, more angry with Slim than she was with Barney, but the years had taught her not to show preference when dealing with the children.

“Oh, sure. Side with him. You always have.” Barney kicked at a photo on the floor. “Sometimes he just makes me tired.”

“Barney, I’m ashamed of you. That’s no way to feel about your father.”

Barney stooped to pick up the photo, and it was the one that must have fallen from Slim’s hand during the storm. He looked down at it for a moment, and when he spoke the fierceness had left his voice.

“I know,” he admitted. “I guess it just got me mad.”

“Barney, you shouldn’t ever laugh at him because he used to look like that.” Carolyn drew a weary breath.

“Gosh, I wasn’t laughing that way!” Barney looked up in genuine surprise. “Do you think I’d have shown the fellows these if I’d been ashamed? If you ask me, they were all pretty impressed. And I—well, maybe I was fooling a bit.” His voice dropped awkwardly. “I was looking at this and remembering when it was taken, not so long before we left the ranch, and all at once I felt a bit scared.”

“Scared!”

Barney shifted uncomfortably. “You know—that any fellow who looked as fine as that just over ten years ago, could look like dad does today. I never thought of it, but he must be still a fairly young man.”

Carolyn reached out for the photo, and she looked at the fearless, smiling young face in that picture. Suddenly an icy finger seemed to touch her heart. For Barney, in an unsuspected moment of revelation, had laid wide open something which she had resolutely sought to hide.

Paula came close. "Mother, did daddy really look like that ten years ago?" Her eyes held both awe and wonder. "It's no wonder you loved him."

"Yes, dear." Carolyn's voice was almost inaudible. She noticed that her hands were trembling.

Paula sat on the edge of the table. "Mother, tell me something about the ranch. You never have."

"Oh, there's so little to tell." Almost feverishly, to break away from her own thoughts, she pulled out another photo. "You see, that was the house where you were both born." Suddenly she saw that house very clearly. Just as suddenly, she found herself talking of things she had thought long forgotten; things to do with the beauty of the country, with Slim in his active, happy outdoor life, and the fun and courage of that distant, youthful struggle.

"Mum, why ever did you leave?" She was brought back by Barney. He sat at the table with chin on hands, and his eyes were serious and wide.

"My dear,"—she tried to laugh—"there weren't even any schools."

"Schools!" Barney sat up straight. "You mean you both had to give up all that because of us?" He sounded appalled. "My gosh, now I see why it sometimes gets you both down! You never told us that."

"Why, we wouldn't ever have let you do it," Paula declared emphatically.

"I'll say we wouldn't."

"Stupid, you were only six." Carolyn tried to make her voice sound normal.

"Well, I'm not six now, and—mother, listen." Suddenly Barney leaned forward. His face was alive with inspiration. "What's to stop you from going back now? Why, sure you can!" Under the impulse of his enthusiasm, he drowned every attempt at argument. "I'll be at university, and then at medical. Why, I'd certainly get a big kick out of having a real ranch to bring the fellows home to on holidays. And, look here—how do you know things aren't different now—more roads and transportation? I've read they're getting down to this business of rural schooling a lot more, these days.

Anyway, they've got Government school courses by mail, and you're smart enough to teach Davey anything. You might even be able to teach any other kids around, too. As for Paula, you know the doctor said she's so far ahead, she ought to rest up awhile."

To Carolyn's amazement, Paula joined her brother eagerly. "Mother, Rosie could spend summers with me and we could ride—dad could teach us."

"I bet he'd be a different fellow out there."

"I think you'd both be different." Paula's delicate face was earnest. "I think that when you loved each other and us so much that you left it all, it would be marvellous to see you go back before you get too old to enjoy life."

Carolyn looked at both their eager young faces, and she knew suddenly and poignantly that she could not tell them she had done it not just for them, not because she and Slim had thought it best, but largely for herself. Not when the children were showing something she had never dreamed of; something that must have come, not from herself but from all that was best and finest in Slim. Not when they believed in a mutual love and sacrifice that had not wholly existed, and were so intensely desirous of giving back what had been given to them.

Nevertheless, it was nonsense. Sheer, impractical young nonsense. They were all happy and settled here, in the city. She told them so, repeatedly and gently, and they followed her to the kitchen, still protesting.

"Well, shall we go ahead and put it up to dad?"

"Don't you dare bother your dad."

She went upstairs with a bowl of steaming soup. Slim might still be in a mood to want to throw it at her. But by morning his temper would have completely cooled, and life would flow on quietly as before.

But Slim lay asleep across the bed. He lay on his back, fully clothed. As always, he slept quietly, and in sleep an elusive youth touched his still features. She stood there a long time, and the icy finger crept in and rested on her heart again. Slim's face looked oddly frail and shadowed in repose; there was little of that blond, laughing cowboy left. There was so little of the splendid joy of living. She wondered just what constantly surging depths of suffering must lie within, to cause these periodical furies

that burned so fiercely and left him so dispirited and spent, and then more gentle to them than before. She caught a fresh vision of a boy sitting on a flower-covered hilltop with his hand across his heart. "I feel it here, because it's part of me." It was still as big a part of Slim, and always would be! Who, after all, was she, to ignore and slowly destroy such a vital thing in any man? Perhaps, after all, it was not nonsense—that way in which her own children had pointed.

Slim's eyes were suddenly wide open and watching her as she stood, lost in thought, with the bowl of soup still in her hands.

"Carolyn, you're so beautiful!" His voice was low. His gaze followed her as she drew near, but he seemed too tired to move. "I reckon I deserve everything you might be thinking," he said slowly.

Carolyn set the soup down carefully. She sat on the bed, and took one of Slim's cold, work-hardened hands in one of hers. With the other, she smoothed back the thick, faded yellow hair.

"Slim, I reckon you do," she said softly.

THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled 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.

Illustrations have been relocated due to using a non-page layout.

A cover was created for this ebook which is placed in the public domain.

[The end of *The Exile* by Beryl Gray]