

*THERE'S
ALWAYS
ANOTHER
YEAR*

MARTHA OSTENSO

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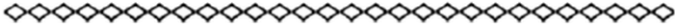
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WILD GEESE

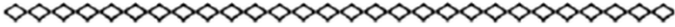
THE DARK DAWN

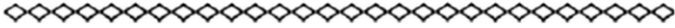
THE MAD CAREWS

PROLOGUE TO LOVE

THE YOUNG MAY MOON

THE WATERS UNDER THE EARTH





MARTHA OSTENSO

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**DODD, MEAD & COMPANY
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For

MARIE AND LESTER

**THERE'S ALWAYS
ANOTHER YEAR**



CHAPTER ONE

ORDINARILY, when the Heron River Band—an eight-man institution which included a twelve-year-old snare-drummer and a bass-drummer of sixty—played, of a summer night, *Hail, Hail, The Gang's All Here*, and proceeded with proper solemnity into *My Country, 'Tis of Thee*, old Shad Finney looked at old Nils Ulevik and said, “Wa-al, she’s finished, mate. We better get along.” And Nils, sucking on his pipe, would nod his head in grave accord.

But this was no ordinary band-concert-night in July. The telegraph operator, Albert Symes, had stopped in at Torson’s Ice Cream Parlor and with bland casualness had let fall the information that the Express was going to stop at the Heron River depot this evening. It was not only going to slow down as was its wont to drop off the incoming mail and to snatch up the outgoing, but it was going to come to a definite standstill. To let off a passenger. And who hadn’t read in today’s *Maynard Times* about the shooting, over a gambling table in Chicago, of Gentleman Jim Grenoble—Gentleman Jim who still owned half of the Grenoble Farm, fancily called *Ygdrasil* by a fancy wife now long dead; and who had a daughter who must now be nineteen or twenty? Albert Symes, being a man of honor in his profession, hadn’t said that there had been a wire to Sophronia Willard, Jim’s married sister, about Jim’s daughter, stating that she would arrive on the evening train. But Tillie Fink, of the telephone office, had conscientiously listened in while Albert had conveyed the message to Phronie Willard at eight o’clock that morning. So that it had been unnecessary for Albert Symes to betray his trust.

Another interesting angle in the situation was that Roddy Willard, stepson of Sophronia, had mysteriously disappeared in his car yesterday. His departure was certainly perplexing, because Lem Swallow, whom he had given a lift into Maynard, had been able to elicit no information from him. “Oh, just a little trip,” Roddy had said. In view of the fact that Elsbeth Fink, the post-mistress and sister of Tillie, knew that four letters had been placed

in Roddy's rural mail box during the past ten days, all in the same feminine handwriting, the circumstances were intriguing indeed.

All in all, conditions certainly warranted a change of procedure on the part of those two old cronies, Shad Finney and Nils Ulevik. They stamped heartily enough upon the advent of *Hail, Hail*, seated as they were on the steps of the pavilion, but after that they glanced at their watches. And immediately those others who possessed watches drew them out from snug pockets, looked at them, gave a thoughtful wind to the stems and replaced them.

There was a general movement toward the depot, a block away, across from the lumber yard. Eighteen or twenty grown persons and a scattering of children. Two little girls of eleven or twelve paraded airily up and down the platform, arm in arm, their hair arranged just-so. A boy whistled between his teeth, and the two girls looked intently away across the slough beyond the tracks.

"D'you s'pose Phronie'll be here?" Shad whispered to Nils. "'Taint likely she'll send Jason to meet her. The looks o' him's enough to scare the old Nick hisself!"

Nils shrugged. "She could do vorse," he remarked. "Yase yust so good so his brudder Roderick."

Shad spied Duke Melbank standing amid four or five men on the depot platform immediately beneath the sole electric light, which, under its disk, was projected on a rod from above the door of the depot. Duke—whose real name was Earl—was bareheaded as usual, and his flaming red hair, shaven close about the ears and neck, could have been seen a quarter mile away beneath that light.

Duke was tall, narrow-shouldered, tubular. His body suggested a length of sponge. His hands, even in summer, were always pale, were covered with red freckles and were clammy to the touch. His nails started up abruptly from the flesh, and were bitten to the quick. He had a loud, almost incessant laugh which was peculiarly devoid of both mirth and meaning. When he was twelve years old he had been expelled from the district school for having written, on outhouse walls, obscene legends concerning his teacher. He was an only son, and lived with his mother on a shambles of a farm fringing Heron River. Since farming had become unprofitable, Jess Melbank and her son supplied homebrew to the neighborhood and to the campers on the lakes to the north at twenty-five cents a quart. Jess, in coloring, appeared to have been the inspiration of Duke. She was as broad, however, as she was long, and no one had ever seen her in anything but a black sateen wrapper held

together by a man's leather belt with a huge silver buckle in front. Not only beer was brewed in that cellar of hers. Unpleasant report of anyone in the county could usually be traced to that dark and noisome retreat.

Soon after Shad Finney and Nils Ulevik had gained the steps of the platform, Jess Melbank could be seen waddling forward from the shadowed extreme end of it. She had cut across fields and vacant lots to arrive within ten minutes of train time. The evening being oppressive, Jess carried a huge palm fan, which she waved dexterously across the vast and flabby expanse of her.

The unusual exertion had apparently been a bit too much for Jess. She sank with audible relief down upon a bench against the depot wall, still some distance from the group of idlers who surrounded her son Duke. Shad and Nils with a certain feeling of distaste, it must be admitted, edged nearer the group. Shad found a plug of tobacco in a hip pocket, fastidiously cut off a portion with his jack-knife, then offered the plug to Nils.

The two old men may not have been listening to the utterances of Duke Melbank—those utterances so punctuated by his own snickers and guffaws that it took an alert ear to gather their meaning. They may not have been listening, exactly—because they were nice old men, not given to a busy interest in scandal. But they could, nevertheless, not help overhearing.

Some weeks ago, Duke Melbank, on his thirty-fourth birthday, had discovered Chicago. And Chicago, Ned Burgess, editor of the *Heron River Sentinel*, had estimated, would never be the same again. Duke had read the news item at first with a slightly sour look, because Ned considered himself above everybody in the county except the Willards. But whatever Ned's intent had been, it was something to have your name in the paper, and at length the clipping nestled in Duke's vest pocket, along with certain photographs he had got from a traveling man who had been in France.

Everybody in Heron River knew, by now, what had happened on Duke's visit to Chicago, but tonight was an occasion which called for the retelling of the event.

"You was in the Grenobles' suit, wasn't you, Duke?" somebody prompted.

"They don't call it a 'suit,'" Duke disclosed loftily. "They call it an 'apartment.' You bet your punkins I was in it. I wouldn't 'a' got in, neither, except I met ol' Jim hisself in a speak-easy, and I come right home with him, bein' from his home town. He was worried like, and he didn't seem to know I was along. There was a gang to his place, all right, all right! Say, boy! Maybe I didn't smile like a wooden fox after seven or eight o' them drinks

they give me! And then”—Duke drew himself up and hooked his thumbs into his green-and-orange striped suspenders—“in she comes! Silver pajamas, by hickory! They was all playin’ roulette—you know, like they play over to Gale’s Point.” He paused and flicked his cigarette into the outer air. He knew roulette. These hicks who hadn’t even been at Gale’s Point probably thought it was dominoes. “Up gets this guy from the table and she goes with him into another room and shuts the door! She never even seen me. Wouldn’t ’a’ known me, anyhow. Somebody says it’s her, so I know. I get up pretty soon and goes and opens the door, easy like. And there she is with her back to me and this guy bendin’ over her like he’s gonna kiss her!” Duke croaked joyously, his head thrown back with the relish of reminiscence.

Somebody prodded him. “Here comes Phronie Willard, Duke! Shut up!”

Duke glanced about him truculently. “What do I care?” he swaggered. “I seen Lucas—”

“He’s a big gambler, ain’t he, Duke?” A spindly youth, who had heard Duke’s story before, put the question in an awed and avid whisper.

“I’ll tell the world!” said Duke loudly, straightening his arm and tapping cigarette ash in the direction of Sophronia Willard, the tall, gaunt, dark-faced woman who was at that moment ascending the steps of the platform.

Nils Ulevik and Shad Finney glanced anxiously at Sophronia as she passed them. They hoped she had not overheard any of Duke’s talk, for they were law-abiding citizens, and had a distaste for public violence.

But Sophronia Willard, straight and strong as a pine, and as awe-inspiring as one, ignored Duke Melbank’s little group just as such a majestic tree might ignore the petty whisperings of scrub growth in a forest.

Black-gloved, black-hatted, a black crocheted reticule on her arm, she took up her stand on the middle of the platform and remained oblivious of the eyes that were fixed upon her. Those eyes might wink knowingly into the eyes of a neighbor, because it is the desire of the herd to conform, but even the wink had a certain shadow of respect for the unknown. And except for her somewhat ludicrous outward aspect, Sophronia Willard was unknown.

She stood, composed and stern, looking neither to right nor to left. The whistle of the train, still some miles away, could be heard now, coming through the hot, moonless spell of the night, a baleful, prolonged wail, at once hollow and shrill.

Sophronia had had since eight o’clock this morning to prepare for her meeting with her brother’s daughter, Anna—“Silver,” her mother had

frivolously called her, because of the pallor of her hair and skin. Sophronia was washing the separator in the milk house when Jason had shouted to her that she was wanted on the telephone.

Albert Symes, the telegraph operator, had read the telegram to her. He had said first, clearing his throat: "I have bad news for you, Mrs. Willard." Phronie had said, "Go on, go on, man! Read it." Then Albert had proceeded with the message: "As attorney to your brother James Grenoble I assume the painful duty of informing you that your brother was shot fatally early this morning by one Lewis Rawson. Rawson was killed by police as he was trying to make his escape. Your niece Silver Grenoble will arrive Heron River tonight's train. Take care of her. Benjamin Hubbard."

Sophronia had made no outcry. She had given Albert Symes a curt "Thank you." Then she had seated herself on the chair beside the telephone and had looked up at it, there on the wall, for a long time. Jason had stood near by, fumbling with a piece of harness, or something—she forgot just what. Her eyes had moved to him slowly, and it seemed to her suddenly that this stepson of hers was more hunch-backed than usual. She could see that pitiful excrescence of bone and flesh mounting from behind the line of his shoulder. She saw his mournful, deep eyes—like the eyes of a dog that had been run over and begged to be removed from its pain.

"Jim is dead," she told him, as she might tell him that the clock needed winding.

Jason turned the bit of leather about in his powerful hands—hands that could bend a horse-shoe inside out without trouble.

"How?" he asked. His voice was husky and soft as wind moving over tall grass. "How did he die?"

"He was shot."

"Was he in Chicago still?"

"Yes."

"It would be a gambler shot him," Jason said, and his glance fell.

"I guess," Phronie said. "His daughter is coming on tonight's train. It was Jim's lawyer telegraphed."

"Too bad Roddy isn't here," Jason said laboriously. "He could meet her, Phronie."

The angry red sprang into Sophronia's cheeks. "You're good enough to meet her, Jason," she said sharply. "You're good enough to meet anybody, and don't you think different!"

Jason smiled with great gentleness, as though it were Phronie who was ill-formed. "You know I ain't," he said. "You've got to drive in."

"All right, Jase," she replied, to have it done with. "Now I've got to finish the separator."

The shining metal of the separator made whirling disks before her eyes. Jim—Gentleman Jim! Her only brother, younger than herself—handsome and wild as their grandfather had been. Not made for this land their grandfather had homesteaded on, though. Going off the deep end when his wife, Anna Egstrom, that lovely Swede, had died without asking your leave! Jim had gone away then, leaving her, Sophronia, in possession of half this farm that had belonged to their father and to their grandfather—leaving her with the responsibility of the entire farm, his own half as well as hers! Going off after his wife's death, with his seven-year-old daughter, as though the earth had swallowed them up. What had there been for Sophronia to do but to marry Roderick Willard, the widower on a farm in the next county? She had deeded her share of the land to him because he had had the money to work it—and he had built this new house on the ridge, not more than a stone's throw above the little old place in which the Grenobles had lived for three generations, in which Silver Grenoble had been born and Anna Egstrom had died.

Roderick Willard had been kind. Sophronia had loved him, she supposed, so far as she knew anything of love. And his two sons, in their early 'teens then, had responded to her mothering, had affectionately accepted her. But Roderick, who had sold his own farm before his marriage to Sophronia, had wanted to secure complete possession of the Grenoble Farm. Jim Grenoble, for some romantic reason, had refused to sell his section, and although Roderick and his sons had worked it through all the years, it had never become Willard land, and Roderick, aging now, had passed his resentment on to his son, young Roddy.

Two years after her marriage to Roderick Willard, when her stepsons were in high school at Heron River, Sophronia had had her first news of Jim. He and Silver were in Alaska. Jim had been in the salmon fisheries on the Columbia River and had drifted up the coast. He did not say what he was doing, but Silver was being looked after in a convent school. Jim sent two thousand dollars, that time, for Phronie to carry on the work of the farm—and no questions asked. The farm was paying its way then, and more. Phronie thought Jim had probably gone crazy.

Next year Jim was in Nevada. And later in Mexico. Mining, he said. His daughter was also in Mexico, in the care of nuns, and was learning Spanish and German and French. Sophronia, remembering the fair child of seven,

who was so much like that dreamy, foreign mother of hers, wondered. Sophronia wrote Jim then that her husband, Roderick Willard, wanted to buy him out. But Jim had some sentimental attachment for the place, because of his wife Anna, who had called it *Ygdrasil*. That word, in Norse mythology, Anna had said, meant the Tree of Life. There was a huge oak in front of the old Grenoble farm house.

They couldn't budge Jim. He refused to sell. Why did he want to hang on to a farm that he never meant to visit again? He was gambling for a living. Sophronia would have guessed that, even though Newt Fisher, who had run into him in Nevada, hadn't brought the news back. But his wife Anna had curiously loved her *Ygdrasil*—silly name, silly woman! Sophronia always grew uncomfortable when she thought of Anna. Well, who hadn't loved her? She was gentle as spring rain.

And what would this daughter of hers be like? Sophronia wondered with misgiving. Product of convents (of all things—and Jim raised a Presbyterian!) and boarding schools from Nome to Nicaragua—daughter of a fairy mother who had died at twenty-eight, and a father madder than his own grandfather, who would lay bets with the moon as to the color of its back-hair—what would the daughter be like? She had been born on this farm, it was true, but would she remember anything of it that was sane and sound?

Phronie had gone on washing the separator. She struggled to thrust back her memories of Jim, to recall only his unfairness, his selfishness. But it was no good. Damn him! Damn him! Why couldn't he have come back, just once? She had wheeled him through the potato patch in his go-cart when he was a year old, and had been spanked for it afterwards. She, five years his senior, had taught him to play mumblety-peg and to skin slippery elm. And he hadn't come back.

Now this young Anna Grenoble—Silver, Phronie emended with a sniff—would probably sell her share of the land immediately to one of those concerns in the city that was buying up sections around here for a pittance, against the time when the land would be worth something again. Silver Grenoble would have no use for a dreary existence on a northern farm, where taxes were a nightmare that continued through the day, through every hour of merciless toil. No doubt Jim had left her well provided for, and it would mean only the turn of a wrist, pen in hand, for her to dispose of a negligible property.

To young Roddy, twenty-seven now, with Agricultural College behind him, it would be a staggering blow. He had never given up hope of one day owning the entire farm.

It was like Roddy that yesterday he should have gone off to Ballantyne in his car, saying only that he had to go. Sophronia had her own ideas as to why he had gone, but she did not press his confidence. She thought uneasily of the letters that had come to him from Ballantyne in the past week or so, and of his niggardly disclosure of their contents. It was no secret to anyone that the Ballantyne bank had failed that summer, but that Corinne Meader, the president's daughter, should be writing so persistently to Roddy Willard was a curious thing.

A few summers ago, when the girl was a house guest at a cottage on Twin Deer Lake, to the north, she had driven over and spent the afternoon at the farm, and Sophronia had learned then who it was that had become Roddy's ideal at college. She was a vivacious creature, Phronie recalled, very smartly dressed, with curly brown hair and brown eyes that had a way of widening innocently up at Roddy—a way that had made Phronie grimly sick while she stalked through the barnyard showing the young thing from the city how old "Stumpy," the hen with one foot, was rearing a brood of turkey chicks. Corinne had pouted prettily over her own ignorance concerning all farm lore, and Roddy, tickled, indulgent, had laughed. Sophronia would never forget her own effort to serve the girl iced tea in the sitting room. She would never forget how Corinne's eyes had roamed over the place, scanning the floors, the walls, the furniture. And Roddy had sat there holding a glass and struggling to make his hands look small.

The neighbors did not know where Roddy had gone. It was just as well. They talked too much anyhow.

But had he been here now he might have prepared himself for Silver's arrival. It would go hard with Roddy if she meant to sell her land for cash. But if she could be persuaded to accept a fair rental . . . Sophronia resolved to take the bull by the horns and suggest it to her before Roddy got home.

The train came to a stop in Heron River. People crowded forward, looking eagerly along the line of coaches. Perhaps for the most part they did not know just what they expected to see when Silver Grenoble stepped down upon the platform.

What they did see was a tallish, thin girl in a tailored suit of dove-gray silk and a felt hat of the same color—a hat that showed beneath it a white, immobile face and enormous dark eyes, and plainly dressed hair that seemed colorless. For a moment she stood looking uncertainly about, and then Sophronia Willard advanced upon her with her black-gloved hand outstretched.

Shad Finney, craning a little, saw an unmistakable tear glide down the older woman's weathered cheek.

A porter had deposited on the platform two travelling bags of fine black leather, a name stamped on each in silver. Two little boys scampered up to the cases and read the name loudly enough for all to hear.

A murmur moved about the platform. "She goes by the name of Silver, eh? Kind o' funny."

Shad Finney and Nils Ulevik stood at a decent distance, their watery old eyes taking in the scene. They observed the meeting of the two women but could not hear what passed between them. They saw the girl seize one of the travelling bags, Sophronia the other. A baggage man spoke to them about a trunk that had been taken off the train, and after a word of instruction, Sophronia moved away with Silver to the steps at the head of the platform.

Jess Melbank had risen from her bench and had ambled forward, to stand surveying the strange girl up and down as she advanced. Sophronia ignored her, and one might have thought that Silver Grenoble did not see either her or anyone else in that gathering.

But just as the two women reached the platform steps, Duke Melbank cleared his throat with a long, profound rumble, and then coughed lightly behind his hand. A titter arose. Sophronia, setting down the suitcase she carried, swung about.

"That was you, wasn't it, Duke?" she said in her explosive voice.

"Me what?" Duke asked innocently.

"It was him," a small boy piped, and darted behind his mother's skirts.

"You know what I mean," Sophronia said loudly. "It was you that coughed."

"Can't a guy cough?" Duke demanded with an injured air.

Sophronia Willard was not one to mince matters. Her long arm shot forward, and her large, bony fist came accurately home just beneath the soft cleft of Duke Melbank's chin. A gasp rose from the crowd. Duke reeled backward, struck his shoulder blade against the depot wall and uttered a sound half way between a grunt and a whine.

Phronie stood back from him, her face alight with satisfaction. She was about to turn away when Jess Melbank, with amazing alacrity for one of her weight, suddenly stepped between Phronie and Duke.

Jess screamed maledictions. She shook her fist in Sophronia's face. Her language was of the cellar of cellars. She knew—everybody else in Heron River knew—what the daughter of Jim Grenoble was! Small boys stood

rooted, little girls sped back in terror. Women turned pale and men's mouths twisted. But Jess Melbank did not strike Phronie Willard. And Phronie remained motionless as granite. While Jess was drawing breath to begin anew, Phronie turned haughtily away, swept up the suitcase and led Silver down the steps. The two old men saw the women get into the old Willard car and vanish down the street.

There had been a moment of dead silence in which Nils and Shad could hear the hot chorus of locusts in trees near by, and farther away in the swamp across the railroad track the uninterrupted, liquid melody of frogs. But now again there was the unpleasing babble of human voices. Shad hooked his arm in Nils Ulevik's, and the two made off, sickened a little, wondering much.



CHAPTER TWO

ON that night in July, a night that was moonless but whitely lambent with stars, a southwest wind moved in sultry indolence up across the stupendous void of Dakota, and thence across the state line and over farm lands suddenly lush with yield. Impartially the wind passed on and the earth that sensed its passing became less opulent, less tamed, less avowedly the thrall of generations of men. The prairie became shaggy with patches of northern woodland; it surrendered to intervals of lakes and swamps and rivers. Even where man, with firebrand and plough, had beaten back her stubborn forces, the earth seemed now to be waiting, sullenly, silently, to wrest back from him whatever he had claimed for his own.

The wind moved, scarcely more than a brooding phantom of air, over the little village of Heron River, and along the road that led from that cluster of dwellings to the northeast. It lightly touched Roddy Willard's cheek and stirred his dark, uncovered hair as he drove his car toward Heron River. His thoughts were so intense that every now and then the motor came almost to a halt on the narrow, winding road. At such times he would impatiently apply his foot to the accelerator and continue for a while at a reckless speed.

He did not see the road before him, fringed and made mysterious on either hand by dense hemlock and slender, ghostly birch trees. He saw rather the monotoned panorama of his own life, unrolling backward to the years of his adolescence, when his father had sold the farm in the adjoining county, married Sophronia Grenoble, and moved to the Grenoble place, half of which had become his property. "Gentleman Jim" Grenoble when he had begun his life of vagabondage had refused to relinquish his section. But now in the foreground of that panorama, bright and excitingly strange, was the face of Corinne Meader.

In one week Corinne would be his wife.

He saw her face as he had seen it that first day, in an ice-cream parlor, an hour after he had registered at the State Agricultural College, seven years ago. He had been twenty, older than most of the entrants, and Corinne was

seventeen, a freshman in Arts at the University. Harry Richter had introduced them, and even now, after everything that had happened, Roddy's heart beat oppressively again as he recalled the widening of Corinne's brown eyes and her slow, thorough survey of him. She had hesitated for a moment and then, glancing with a curious smile at his hand, she had extended her own and in his huge, hard grasp it had been swallowed completely. He had kept his eyes fastened dumbly upon her face and had seen her lids droop in a way that could have been nothing but deliberate coquetry. Roddy had blushed furiously as he heard Harry Richter's amused laugh.

She was the daughter of the banker in Ballantyne. It was something of a wonder that he, Roddy Willard, should have taken her to the movies and to dances a number of times during their college career, a little bewildered, a little uncertain, and very much flattered by the occasional, capricious preference she showed him over all the other admirers who flocked about her.

One summer vacation she had driven over from a house party on Twin Deer Lake and had found Roddy on the Willard farm, anxiously ministering to a sick horse in the pasture. Later, Corinne had sat in Sophronia's parlor and had glanced about at the walls. A few days later he had substituted some etchings and water-colors for his stepmother's horrible *objets d'art*. But Corinne had never come again, and afterwards Roddy had been a little ashamed of his snobbery in removing Phronie's treasures, even though, truth to tell, the walls were more pleasing without the burnt leather image of Pocahontas with the calendar beneath.

Roddy wondered now why it was that he had never kissed Corinne during those years while he was seeing her frequently. Perhaps it was his own humility. Perhaps it was because he suspected that it was his physical self alone that appealed to her, and that beyond the satisfaction of an established conquest she would have no use for him. He was in earnest where Corinne was concerned, and he had been afraid of discovering that she was not in earnest about him.

But he knew now that she had been in earnest. When calamity had befallen her family, she had turned to him, although she had seen him only three or four times since they had both been graduated—and then at Ballantyne dances to which she had invited him.

A month ago, the local papers had made much of the failure of the bank in Ballantyne, though all had absolved from blame old Edwin Meader, Corinne's father. Roddy had had a number of letters from Corinne after that, and their tone had become increasingly despondent. What was she to do?

Her father was completely broken. Her mother had fifty dollars a month of her own to live on. Corinne, who had been one of the Ballantyne smart set, had made efforts to get a position at teaching, even in a country school, but the school boards were flooded with applications. Her last letter had been one of complete despair.

When, early this morning, Roddy had set out for Ballantyne in his car, he had had the curious feeling that the sun was a little too bright, that he could not see as clearly as he had been used to do, over undulating prairies that he knew as well as he knew his own face. But there had been a tense excitement about that journey, and when he had come to its end he had seen Corinne, small and beautifully made, and Corinne's brown eyes with their look of helpless appeal—and within an hour, beneath the grape arbor of the Meader place, he had asked her to marry him. He had told her that he hoped to get the Grenoble land, a richer tract than his own, and that after a while life on a farm would not be as harsh as it was being painted just now.

Corinne had seemed frightened and abashed and timid and thrilled. She had let her eyes move slowly up over his tall body and the breadth of his shoulders—and he had flushed with an unaccountable feeling of humiliation. Then she had thrown her arms about his neck and sobbed that she had always loved him and that she would marry him as soon as he wished.

Her mother, a plump, pink little woman, with soft hands and a disposition to ignore the catastrophe that had befallen the Meaders, gave them her blessing with a bright gaiety that admitted not the least suspicion of any incongruity in the match. Corinne, of course, must have a proper wedding, even if things were bad. "A quiet little wedding here at home," Mrs. Meader said briskly. "The Congregational Church is too big and cold."

Roddy had seen through Mrs. Meader's little pretext. But Corinne had looked across at him with widening amusement in her eyes, and he had gravely suppressed a grin.

He had spent the day with the Meaders, although he was uncomfortable with pity for old Edwin, who sat, oblivious of all that went on about him, in a chair in his study.

Thus it had happened. Roddy pulled himself erect in his car as he came to the turn in the road that led westward past Twin Deer Lake. He was two miles from home now, if he took the short-cut. Over there, a mile or so across brush and prairie, blinked the dozen street lights of Heron River. By this time, he reflected, the usual crowd would have left the village and gone

their ways. It wasn't so late but that he might drive in and have a cup of coffee at Torson's Ice Cream Parlor before going home.

He turned his car away from the highway and headed for the village.

People seated on their screened verandas in the town of Ballantyne observed that a faint breeze had sprung up from the southwest, and although it was pleasant after the heat of the day, it might mean rain for the morrow. With harvest so near at hand . . .

But Corinne Meader, undressing in her mauve and white bedroom, was grateful for the breeze that caressed her hot throat and temples from the open window. She hoped with arid fervor that her mother would not come bustling in before she was in bed with the light out, to have a "cosy chat" with her. That, Corinne thought, would be too, too much.

She brushed her hair with hurried strokes. But her own beauty—which had availed her nothing!—stared back at her from her mirror, and presently she leaned forward on her palms and gazed long and intently at her own image.

"And so—*you* are going to marry a farmer, my dear!" her lips said softly.

Mrs. Meader, however, was not wanting in maternal solicitude. She opened the door, closed it behind her, and stole into a chair beside Corinne's dressing-table as though some conspiracy were afoot.

"Darling," the mother breathed, "you won't mind my sitting for a minute while you get ready for bed? I'm—I'm just as excited as though it were I who was getting married! It's all so unexpected—I had no idea! But Roddy is a dear, Corinne—a perfect dear!"

"He's awfully good-looking," Corinne said with forbearance, and continued to wing out her hair with her brush.

She went on communing with herself, only half hearing her mother's cloying, intimate voice. "You can thank heaven he appeals to you physically," said Corinne silently to her own reflection. "And he's educated. Probably, with your help, he will have a future—something better than grubbing on the land."

"And he has quite a *large* farm, too, hasn't he?" Mrs. Meader was saying. "And quite near Maynard. It isn't as though you were going to be marooned on some backwoods homestead for the rest of your days. You can drive over to see us often, too, after you're married."

"I suppose so," Corinne conceded.

“Oh, dear—it’s going to be terrible giving up this house, darling—if it comes to that. After all these years! But I mustn’t talk about such things now—and you so happy.”

“You won’t have to give up the house, now that I’m provided for,” Corinne reminded her cynically.

Mrs. Meader chose to let that pass. “Of course,” she observed, “if you had married Sylvester Edgett when he asked you—”

“Mother!” Corinne squealed. “His pimples!”

Mrs. Meader gave a deprecating little laugh. “I didn’t mean that seriously, darling, you know that. And anyhow, he’s only a bookkeeper.”

Corinne, although she was still addressing herself, spoke aloud. “Yes, I could have married Sylvester. Or I could go now and clerk at eleven dollars a week in Ellingboe’s Drygoods Store. And all the girls in town could come in and ask for samples of white satin, and giggle, and tell me it’s for their wedding dresses! No, thanks. I’d rather die than do that.”

Mrs. Meader rose as though with a little flutter of outspread wings. She put a plump arm about Corinne’s shoulders, and a round, bright tear trembled on her pink cheek.

“My baby!” she quavered. “To think I am going to lose you—and so soon! And to think that the bank had to—to fail before you got settled in your own home. It’s just too—cruel!”

“Now, mother,” Corinne said with supreme patience, “don’t *do* that!”

“All right. I’m sorry, darling,” her mother whimpered, and dabbed her nose with a bit of lace and chiffon. “But I can’t help thinking of all the chances you’ve had to marry well—of course they weren’t good enough! But if Harry Richter’s father hadn’t been so against Harry’s marrying just now—”

Corinne stood up, sighed. “Please, mother! You’re talking as though I were being sold in a slave market. Harry knows what he wants. It’s his father’s business he wants—and his father’s money—not me. Anyhow, I’m not in love with Harry. It’s just that you’ve been expecting great things of me—and the miracle didn’t come off! Now, be a good girl and go to bed. I’m tired.”

She kissed her mother, and with her arms about her propelled her gently toward the door. Mrs. Meader murmured a reluctant and tender good night and Corinne was alone.

She went back to the oval glass of her ivory dressing-table, picked up a nail file and flicked it across her perfectly manicured thumb-nail. When she

glanced at her reflection, it was with a small, curled smile of satisfaction in contemplating the fine tapering of her eyebrows, the back-sweep of glossy waves, patrician-wise, from her forehead, and the natural, provocative pout of her red lips. She picked up her perfume bottle, tilted it so that the long stopper was moistened, and applied the fragrance of gardenia to her finger tips. It was lovely to go to sleep with that sweetness clasped beneath your cheek.

Finally, she lit a cigarette, got into bed, and switched off the light. She stretched out sinuously, enjoying the smoke and the smooth coolness of the fine linen sheets, and thinking luxuriously, with frank, rather delicious excitement, of Roddy Willard.



CHAPTER THREE

SOPHRONIA WILLARD had driven a half mile from the limits of Heron River before she spoke to the girl who sat beside her, straight and white as an icicle.

Then Phronie said, between her long white teeth, “Damn them! The ignoramuses. Don’t you mind ’em, child! You’ve done nothin’ wrong. Don’t you let ’em scare you!”

The girl laughed softly. Sophronia glanced at her in surprise, and thought suddenly that she looked in some way much more than nineteen.

“I’m not a child, Aunt Sophronia,” she said. Her voice was low and oddly measured, as though she herself were listening to it. “They didn’t frighten me. I am only sorry they upset you on my account.”

Phronie was discomfited and a bit irritated. “They get away with too much, those galoots!” she said loudly. “A stranger can’t come here that they don’t act up like a pack o’ hoodlums!”

Silver did not reply. Her aunt ventured a glance at her as she jerked the old car around a corner. The girl’s face, with its rather small features, was like marble, no life in anything but her eyes, and they stared straight ahead of her as though she saw something nameless beyond the dark of the windshield. Qualms were unusual with Phronie, but she experienced them now.

“We’ve got to buck up, Silver,” Sophronia said violently. “I know how you feel. Jim was my only brother. If he’d been my father I couldn’t of felt worse. We’ve got to keep a stiff upper lip, my dear.”

The girl’s hands moved over her purse in her lap. Her head turned slightly toward Sophronia.

“I know,” she said in that same level voice. “It must have been a great shock to you, Aunt Sophronia.”

“It was.”

For a little time there was no conversation between them. Sophronia almost wished that the girl had thrown a fit of hysterics—anything, rather than this frozen silence. It was unnatural in such a young thing. Sophronia liked something she could get her teeth into—such as comforting the bereaved, even though she herself might feel twice as bereaved.

“But we won’t do any talking tonight, Silver,” she said presently. “You must get a good rest. I am sorry Roddy—he’s my eldest stepson—I’m sorry he’s away in the good car. This is an awful rattle-trap for you to be comin’ home in!”

“I should have been glad even to walk,” Silver said in a strange tone.

Sophronia found herself becoming more and more perplexed.

“Even that might have been better than this,” she said drily.

Silver seemed to have been thinking her own thoughts. “Your stepson—Roddy,” she ventured, “will he mind very much—my coming?”

“He won’t mind anything, unless you sell your land to a cash buyer,” Sophronia said grimly, and then could have bitten her tongue out. She had just said that tonight they wouldn’t do any talking!

“Oh!”

“I didn’t exactly mean that,” Sophronia shouted. “It’s just that he’s tilled your section with his dad’s until he feels that it’s his own. Don’t pay attention to me tonight. I’m a little scattered, I guess.”

“I don’t think I shall want to sell the land, Aunt Sophronia,” Silver said monotonously. “If you will just let me stay with you, I’ll be ever so grateful.”

Sophronia’s heart leaped. Well, if it was going to be as simple as that!

“Stay!” she exclaimed. “Isn’t this your rightful home? And ain’t I your closest kin? I’d be a fine one, I would, if I didn’t insist on your living with me!”

“Thank you. Aunt Sophronia,” Silver said. “I can’t say any more.”

“You don’t need to,” Sophronia remarked tersely, and put the brakes on her venerable vehicle just in time to round a curve. “And don’t call me ‘Sophronia’! It’s too much like me. I get ‘Phronie’ from them that likes me. You can cut out the ‘aunt,’ too. It makes me feel *on*.”

“Phronie,” Silver repeated thoughtfully. “Dad called you that, but I wasn’t sure—”

“If it was moonlight,” the older woman interrupted, “you could see a stand of white birch against that rise there. The old house—your great-grandfather’s homestead—sits back a ways. It’s part furnished still, just like

it was when he built it, seventy-five years ago. There's a big oak standing in front of it, so you could hardly see it now, even with a moon. We use the place for the crew now during thrashin'. Well, we're gettin' home."

The girl stirred slightly and glanced back down the slope. "I remember this hill," she said.

"Yes, you was born in that old house," Sophronia declared promptly. "And your mother died in it."

Phronie was not particularly intuitive, but she sensed that the girl Silver had drawn back into that curious immobility of hers.

Out of the sultry darkness, old Roderick came toward them from the big house, where one light was burning in the living room. Sophronia saw his arms outstretched toward Jim's daughter, and heard the booming greeting of his voice, and was suddenly afraid. But Jim's daughter did not break down. There was something uncanny about the girl, Sophronia thought in confusion.

In the house, Phronie relieved Silver Grenoble of her wraps and the men took her luggage upstairs. With the firm belief in the efficacy of food to dull the sharp edge of grief, Phronie then busied herself preparing a plate of sandwiches. Jason went to the cooler in the vegetable cellar outside, and brought in a stone jug of ginger beer, while old Roderick kept Silver company in the living room. Roderick smoked his pipe and looked at his great, weathered hands and said very little, for he was thinking of Jim Grenoble and himself, and of how the world can make two such different things of common life. But the warmth and kindness of the old man required no spoken testimony.

When Sophronia returned with the sandwiches, she saw a bit of color on Silver's cheeks, and although her eyes were darting about the room like dark flames, they were no longer the eyes of some stricken animal.

Sophronia placed the sandwiches and glasses on the center table with its crocheted doily, and Jason poured ginger beer into the glasses.

"Now, Silver," she said stoutly, "you must have a bite. That darned old Ford must have played you out—it sure did me."

The men helped themselves, reaching out to the decked table in painful fastidiousness with their large brown hands.

"These sandwiches are kind of ladylike for us, ma," Jason grinned. "I'll bet Silver's never seen the kind we usually eat."

Old Roderick beamed upon Silver with stalwart cheer. "You'll have to learn to make the sort we take with us to the fields, girlie," he said. "There's no foolishness about them!"

For a few minutes while the men made more small talk than was their rule, Sophronia took in Silver's appearance in detail. The girl was slender, but not as frail as Phronie had at first supposed. Her eyes were probably a very dark blue, although by the light of the acetylene lamp they seemed almost black. Her hair was what would be called ash-blond, she decided, and it waved slightly and was dressed in a plain fashion low upon her neck.

Then Sophronia looked about the room and saw it, in a twinkling, as she had not seen it in years. She saw it now because she was wondering what Jim's daughter was thinking about it.

She saw the unobtrusive, faded tan of the wall paper, with the silver stripe in it. That was not in bad taste, she thought stoutly. The curtains were of ecru net, with side strips and valance of plain blue rep; that had been Roddy's idea. He had snatched down the old Nottingham lace which Phronie had so painstakingly starched for years and years, and had stuffed the lot into the kitchen stove. She saw the upright piano of black walnut, the keys yellowing, and recalled that until Roddy had removed it there had been a handsome green velvet scarf on its top, hand-painted in pink roses. Sophronia looked at the walls and thought how much cosier they had been with the pictures and mottoes on them, and the burnt leather panel with the head of Pocahontas and the little calendar below. The beautifully colored and touching *Rock of Ages*, the photograph of the first automobile old Roderick had ever owned, in nineteen-twelve, the rearing horses' heads, called *The Storm*, had been rescued from the pile in the hollow where Roddy had disposed of them, and now hung in Phronie's room upstairs. Their removal from these walls, she recollected with umbrage, had followed the visit of that Corinne Meader.

Now, on the wall opposite her, were three smallish etchings, placed step-ladder fashion. Black and white—no color or life to them! One was only land and sky, the second the same with a windmill stuck in it, and the third was an old horse plodding across a frozen pond dragging a two-wheeled cart.

Roddy despised the bookcase with its writing-leaf, and the books behind its leaded panes—*The Broken Wedding Ring*, *Thelma*, *Lady Vera's Secret*, and a dozen others that could still make Phronie's heart throb of a winter night. His college textbooks Roddy kept on a shelf in his own room. A strange lad, Roddy, Sophronia thought wistfully, as her eyes turned once more to Silver Grenoble.

"And is this lawyer—this Benjamin Hubbard you speak of—" old Roderick was saying—"is he looking after all the—the arrangements?"

“Yes,” Silver replied softly but very clearly. “Ben is looking after everything. It was dad’s wish that his body should be cremated and his ashes sent here—to be near mother’s grave.”

“And did he live long enough to tell you that?” Phronie asked, clearing her throat.

“Oh—he spoke of that some months ago,” Silver said, “right after he had his first heart attack. But he mentioned it again—before he died.”

“I see.” Phronie winked rapidly several times. Her large plaid-bordered handkerchief flicked energetically before her eyes.

The men shifted their feet in awkward silence.

Sophonra kept her eyes on Silver as the girl continued speaking in the same subdued tone. Almost as though she had been there, Sophronia experienced in Silver’s telling, the events of the summer. She saw the scorching day in June when Lake Michigan had looked like a gigantic white blister under a livid sky, when Jim Grenoble had crumpled forward on the street and the doctor had warned him again. She saw Jim’s eyes as he had looked then—levelly into the face of doom. She heard the doctor’s voice telling Jim that one of these days his heart would snap like a rubber band that had been stretched too far. She heard Jim asking his daughter Silver to see to it—if anything happened—that his ashes should rest in the country cemetery at Heron River. Sophronia could hear Silver promising—and pleading desperately with him then to go away with her to some quiet place, away from the tension and fever of the life they were living. And she could see him patting his daughter’s hand gently and telling her that they would go soon—just as soon as they had enough money put by.

Presently when Silver fell silent and sat looking intently at her clasped hands, old Roderick went to her and laid his hand gently on her shoulder, patted it without a word, and then moved into the kitchen, where he lifted the stove lid and knocked out the ashes from his pipe. Jason followed immediately and went out of doors.

Phronie said, “Did Jim never mention wantin’ to come back—I mean—before he knew he was dyin’?”

Silver raised her eyes, and for a moment Sophronia thought she saw in them something besides bewildered grief. There was something secret and fearful in their expression, something startling. The girl parted her lips and then looked fixedly at the wall opposite her. Phronie had the feeling that Silver had been about to impart some difficult information, and then had changed her mind.

“Yes—he was coming back,” she said slowly. “He and I were all ready to come. We had planned to take this morning’s train—the one I took alone.”

Sophronia started. Her handkerchief dropped limply into her lap. Then, without warning, two large tears rolled from her lids and down her long brown cheeks.

“Please don’t, Phronie,” Silver breathed. “I’m sorry—I shouldn’t have ___”

“Never mind me!” Sophronia exclaimed in a tremendous voice. “I’m an old fool. I thought we wouldn’t talk about it tonight. But—well, it’s time we were all turnin’ in.” She got to her feet. “Looks as if Roddy won’t be comin’ home tonight. Jase!” Her younger stepson had entered the room again. “Light the upstairs lamps!”



CHAPTER FOUR

MORE than darkness, more than starlight and an indolent wind flowed into Silver's room through those dormer windows. Silver had been gazing at them for over an hour, and the company that entered there was palpable as her heart-beat, undeniable as a truth individualized in loneliness. The company was composed of Jim Grenoble's love for her mother, Anna; of his tragic loss; his subsequent folly. But it had other members as well: the murmur of trees Jim had planted in his boyhood, the ripe fragrance of fields he had tilled, the faint, gliding chuckle of the creek under the willows, in the ravine below.

She reached for the flashlight she had left on the small table beside the bed. She sat for a moment holding it and listening to the dense silence of the house, separating that silence from the winged presences of her own room.

The others would be asleep now. Barefooted, her high-heeled mules in her hand, and a quilted robe about her, Silver stole downstairs, using the flashlight to guide her through the dark. Like most farm people, Sophronia Willard scorned locked doors. Once outside the house, it was a simple matter to follow the gentle slope down to the old stone building. She was aware of no apprehensiveness in this warm murk. It breathed an impersonal benevolence, a slumbrous and tranquil understanding beyond human power.

Ragweed and foxtail grew high between the dim ruts of the old unused road, and in the occasional flashes of the torch she could see that the shallow ditches on either side were choked with rank growth. On the right, above the ditch, an ancient zig-zag fence was settling into the earth. Against the gray of the wooden fence when the light was flashed upon it, sunflowers appeared, strangely alive and startled and magnified, and the furry purple bloom of thistles, and the sudden flame of a tiger-lily.

Presently she knew she had come to the dooryard of the old house, for the air about her had subtly changed, as though time itself had gathered there. The giant oak stood in massive darkness against the sky, supporting its burden of summer stars. *Ygdrasil*—her father had not permitted her memory

of it to die. Anna Grenoble had named it so. Silver had told Sister Anastasia, in one of the numerous convents of her girlhood, about *Ygdrasil*, and the nun had said, “Your mother must have been a poet, Silver.”

When she was five, Silver had seen the universe from the tree’s topmost branches. The universe had been the sky, blue as a gentian, with its blazing heart; and the earth, careening away below into checkered fields of golden wheat and green corn, and beyond into secret devices of darker green which were little wooded valleys dense with the unknown. When she was seven she had climbed the tree for the last time and had seen her father walking alone beside the creek where the willows grew.

Silver passed beneath the tree and felt her way in her insecure slippers across the ground to the left, the direction from which came the sound of the creek.

The willows were enormous now, webbing the stars, and the soft, bosky earth below. She seated herself and presently, overcome with weariness, she sank down with her head on her arms. It seemed as though she were being drawn bodily and without resistance into that unfathomable, rich depth of darkness beneath her. It was the will to die, she supposed. The German doctor, Johann Schweitzer, Dad Jim’s good friend in Vera Cruz, had talked much about the will to die while he was drinking himself to death among the palm trees and the pink and sky-blue adobe houses, with the buzzards hovering overhead. She had been sixteen then. Johann had told Esteban, the Portuguese, that Silver was too young to be trifled with, and because Johann was known to poison people he did not like, Esteban had slunk off. Johann had had a trouble, but no one had ever learned what it was, and so he had watched his own liver expand with gin until it had crowded out his heart.

Silver lay and stared up through the loose, vast dark body of the willow. Here and there, like an improbable bloom, a white star shone through. It was only twenty-four hours now since Jim Grenoble had died. Just twenty-four hours since this spell of unreality had come upon her. She had not been able to cry, because crying was something real.

It did no good to say, over and over, “He’s gone! Dad Jim is gone!” All that came of that was memories of crystalline, blue-washed mornings in Sitka, of a sweet, rainy ghost of a holiday in Prince Rupert, or a walk with Jim down the headlong streets of Seattle when he was working on the docks there, and she had for the first time attended a public school; or an exciting horseback ride to a mesa near Carson City—that time when her father had sent for her from the school at Denver. The last image marked the end of Jim’s legitimate labors, except for one or two sporadic attempts at mining in Mexico. But he had gambled from the first—even in Cheyenne, where he

had gone into business with a horse-trader, immediately after they had begun their roaming. She had been a little too young to know what the piles of counters on the baize-covered tables meant. She had been too young then to fear for Dad Jim.

Fear had been born in a cabin in Nome, when the half-breed fur trader, Alex Cole, had hurled a bottle at Jim's head. She had been only thirteen then. She had stood frozen with terror, in a doorway, and had seen the bottle miss its mark. Afterwards, when she saw Dad Jim grin and go on with the game while Alex skulked out, she knew that she would never dare tell him of her terror. Nor would she ever dare tell him of the sliding eyes that had already begun to look at her, or of the sliding hands that sought to stroke her hair. Jim Grenoble had lived in a sublime ignorance of these things, in a curious innocence founded in his belief that she was still a little girl. Had she breathed a word of her fear for him and for herself, he would straightway have sent her back to Aunt Sophronia, and gone his singular way alone. The possibility of being separated from Dad Jim had always filled her with desolation, and so she had never permitted him to guess her secret revulsion and alarm.

It was inevitable that he should die as he had died. There was a relentless rightness in his going the way he had gone. At an hacienda near Mexico City, a peon in the employ of Carlos Salamanca had darted out from behind a pomegranate tree one moonlight night after Jim had taken four thousand dollars from his master, but Jim had broken the wrist of the hand that held the knife and had kept the knife as a souvenir of a close call.

She sat up and clasped her arms about her knees and gazed with burning, dry eyes down at the dark flow of the creek. Small anonymous sounds began to distinguish themselves against the bolder drumming of the creek over the stones downstream. From some lake to the north a loon uttered its cry of melancholy and mockery, and another farther away responded with hysterical laughter. Near at hand a cricket fiddled vehemently in his tent of grass, and the leaves of the willow lisped upon the surface of the stream.

It was these things, at last, that broke the harsh, brittle unreality. Silver collapsed, face downward, and sobbed. And presently, in the quiet of exhaustion, thoughts came clear and unobscured.

What would that strange aunt of hers, Dad Jim's sister, have thought if she had told her that there had been another reason, besides his failing heart, for Jim Grenoble's sudden decision to return? Perhaps some day she would tell Sophronia about Gerald Lucas. Some day, when his cool power over her and her capitulation to him was only an evil dream, she might tell Sophronia that it was really from Gerald Lucas that she had fled; that Jim, knowing

Gerald for what he was, had been overcome by the knowledge that Silver was in love with him, and had blamed himself for exposing her to the corruption of his own life.

The wind from the southwest flowed over and about Silver Grenoble as she lay under the willow tree, and although she was conscious now only of a great weariness, she knew deeply that a change was coming, pervasive and calm, into her being.

Roddy Willard brought his car to the curb in front of Torson's place, turned off the lights and stepped down. Someone hailed him from across the street, but he hesitated only a moment and waved his hand.

At the end of the lunch counter, Duke Melbank lounged, rolling a cigarette in his pale, freckled hands. His red hair flamed. Roddy, giving him an indifferent glance, thought there was something more than usually skulking in his attitude.

"A cup of coffee, Lena," Roddy said to the elder Torson girl as she greeted him with a smile.

Then he turned once more to Duke. "Time you were in bed, Duke," he remarked pleasantly. This tall, soft hulk of a fellow was beneath contempt, beneath anger, even for Sophronia's sake, although he had been spreading gossip about Phronie's niece ever since his famous visit to Chicago earlier in the summer.

"'Tain't late," Duke observed with a swaggering roll of his shoulders.

"That visit to Chicago didn't do you any good," Roddy remarked absently. "You've been keeping late hours ever since you got back."

Duke, flattered, grinned and stuck the cigarette into his mouth. "Goin' to bed early don't get you anywheres. I've tried it."

Lena Torson brought Roddy his cup of coffee.

"You been away," Duke said as he slumped down upon a stool and inhaled strenuously from his cigarette.

"Duke checks up on us, Lena," Roddy smiled. "We've got to watch our step."

"No," Duke objected. "I was just thinkin' you ain't heard, maybe, about old Jim Grenoble."

"Gentleman Jim?"

"Sure. Him I seen when I was to Chi last month. I could 'a' told then he wouldn't come to no good end."

“Anything happened?” Roddy asked. There was a certain leering knowingness about Duke that filled him, as always, with distaste.

“Plenty! He got himself shot last night.”

“My God!” Roddy exclaimed. “Who shot him?”

“Fella named Rawson, it was. The police got him. Killed him when he was tryin’ to make his getaway. Some o’ them guys can shoot, no foolin’!”

Duke was rubbing his soft hands together with the excitement of being the first to break the news to Roddy Willard.

“Poor old Jim!” Roddy said to himself. “Sophronia will take that pretty hard, I’m afraid.”

Duke laughed mirthlessly. “Not so’s you’d notice it.”

“You’ve seen her?”

“I seen her, all right, all right. And how! She was down to meet the train tonight.”

“You mean—they sent the body—”

Duke’s hands played together. “Not exactly. The one that came in tonight wasn’t what you’d call a dead one, eh, Lena? I’ll tell the world! It was Jim’s daughter. Her I seen that night in Chi with a big shot by the name o’ Lucas.”

“Is she here?”

“She’s out to the farm, if that’s what you mean. But that oughtn’t to worry you none. She won’t be stayin’ long in these parts, if I know anything. Her kind don’t belong round here.” He chuckled. “I’ve got her number, all right, all right!”

But Roddy did not hear the innuendo. Duke’s disclosure had flashed like lightning across his mind. He tossed a coin on the counter, seized his hat and made for the door.

Driving home, he realized that he was as near to panic as he had ever been in his life. What would this girl’s coming mean? She would undoubtedly sell her land for cash. It was not likely that a couple of hundred a year rental would interest her. He had been sending that amount to Jim Grenoble, after the deduction of taxes, and Jim had promptly sent it back each time to his sister Sophronia. The money had probably been a mere bagatelle to him, or perhaps, as Phronie suggested, some erratic sentiment governed him. Five years ago, the land might have come into the possession of the Willards, had it not been for Jim Grenoble’s obstinacy. Instead, the money that might have bought it had gone into bad investments. How, if they lost the Grenoble section, were all the Willards going to live on the

meager income from their own land, which was, by some trick of nature, not half so rich? And in a week he, Roddy, would have a wife to support as well.

Rapidly he took stock of himself. It was three years now since he had been graduated from college, and although he still clung jealously to what he had learned there, the soil had taken him back to itself again. When he thought now of those times when he had repudiated it and its tyranny, he suffered from a sense of shame. He was big and silent and awkward, just as the land was, and it was as vain for him to try to dissociate himself from it as to separate himself from his own body. He had worked the Grenoble land since he was fifteen, and had vowed that some day it would be his own in fact. And now—

Roddy brought his car to a stop in the little garage beside the barn, and climbed out of it. He walked slowly through the starlit darkness up the path to the house.

He let himself in through the back door and struck a match, found the lamp and lit it. Odd, he thought, but he could have sworn he had heard a footstep in the front hall. He moved through the house and saw a white-faced girl standing in the hall with one foot on the first step of the stairway. She had a flowered, thick robe wrapped tightly about her, and she carried a flashlight and a pair of slippers. Her hair hung to her shoulders, and was soft and pale and wavy, and her eyes were, in that startling moment, enormous.

Silver was the first to speak.

“I suppose you are Roddy Willard,” she said, almost breathlessly. Her eyes continued their luminous gaze.

“Yes,” he said, and came forward with his hand outstretched. “And you are Anna Grenoble, of course.” He tried to relax his mouth into a smile, to check his agitation.

Her hand lay for an instant in his, while they surveyed each other with cool appraisal.

“Yes,” she said, smiling faintly.

“I only just heard—in Heron River—about what happened to your father,” he said haltingly. “I’m terribly sorry.”

Silver stood with one hand on the balustrade and gave him a shadowy look. “Thank you. I—” Her voice trailed away. “I couldn’t sleep—so I went for a walk—down to the old house. I—I didn’t expect to be caught prowling.” She glanced apprehensively up the murky stair-well. “I’m afraid we’ll wake the others. They don’t know I’m down here.”

Roddy struggled for some suitable remark, only to find himself overwhelmed by his own anxiety and confusion. She gave him an odd look,

half apology, half defiance. “Good night,” she said.

“Good night.”

Sleep was out of the question. Roddy went back to the kitchen, turned the lamp low and stepped out the back door. Noah, his curly black dog of indistinguishable breed, rose from the cement stoop and followed him through the yard to the pasture below the barn.

The air had grown cooler, thinner. The delicate bitterness of coming harvest filled Roddy’s nostrils when he drew a deep breath. In a few weeks the threshing crew would be here, from Sven Erikson’s farm. In a few days he would be a married man—and Corinne Meader established in the house of a farmer who looked into the future with blind eyes.

He found it difficult to believe that Jim Grenoble’s death had coincided so nearly with his asking Corinne to marry him. It was almost like rust coming on the eve of reaping.

He lifted his eyes and followed the glittering cowl of the sky down to the southern horizon. From the lower end of the pasture came the sweet, rank smell of the slough, a smell of brown, still water over a rich and fibrous decay of earth. There was a movement in the pasture, heavy and loose, and presently three horses stood vaguely in the gloom, pushing their heads forward over the gate. Roddy stroked the soft noses, first one, then another, and thought that in all life there could be nothing more richly mysterious and warm and strange than the velvety dark muzzle of a horse thrust out to one’s hand in darkness.



CHAPTER FIVE

TOWARD noon of the next day, Sophronia and Silver stood together on the crest of the gentle ridge which supported the new farmstead. Behind them was the immature brush land, new growth of poplar, scrub oak and sumac, with brambly stretches of wild currant, chokecherry and plum. Below them, to the south, commanding an unbroken vista of ripe fields, stood the square white house, the red, gambrel-roofed barn, the windmill, the silo, the corncribs and other out-buildings. To the southwest, woods grew halfway up the low hill, and between the edge of the woods and the new house was the old stone stronghold of the Grenobles. Beyond the barn, where the land sloped away, there was a broad area of grassy hummocks with a swamp at the farther end of it. Cattle and horses grazed there, and in the drier pasture to the north of it there was a scattering of gray sheep. Chickens, turkeys and guinea-hens and ducks populated the farmyard, and a yellow cat slept in the shadow of the horse-trough.

Cloud shadows passing over the bright, still water of the slough and the dark islands of reeds gave strangely the effect of motion, although there was no perceptible wind.

Sophronia favored Silver with a sidelong glance. The girl had her hands in the pockets of her white linen dress, and her eyes, which Phronie had ascertained were a very dark blue, were fixed upon the old house down below. Phronie followed her glance, and saw that old Roderick had placed a ladder against the north wall, and with an armful of shingles and tools had begun the ascent of the roof.

“It don’t take Roderick long to make a change, when his mind’s made up,” Sophronia commented.

“Tell me, Phronie,” Silver asked suddenly, “are you moving into the old house because Roddy is getting married, or because I am here?”

“Because you are here?” Phronie was indignant. “I never heard the like! Roderick and I always said that as soon as either of the boys gets married,

back we go to the old place. Young people have a right to start out by themselves, I always hold.”

Silver was silent for a moment as she thought over what her aunt had said. “I’m glad,” she murmured at last. “I was afraid—perhaps—”

“Afraid of what?”

“I thought maybe Roddy’s wife might not approve of me—because of dad.”

The angry red sprang into Sophronia’s cheeks. “She won’t approve of me, neither, then—I’m Jim’s sister. Corinne Meader ought to be glad she’s got a home to come to, if I know anything. And I don’t think she’ll be fool enough to listen to every Tom-Dick-and-Harry’s yarns. And if she does—let her! Jason’ll stay with them in the new house, ’cause he fixed up his own room in the attic there just the way he likes it—with a skylight an’ all for his funny oil-paintin’. Jason’s a queer one—but he won’t bother Corinne, unless she can’t stand him and his mouth-organ.”

Silver was looking down with a strangely lost expression upon the shimmering field below, where Roddy was binding barley. Jason and Steve, the hired man, had already begun shocking. The figures of the men and horses seemed momentarily to be swallowed up in that brilliance upon brilliance of earth and sky, and then to appear startlingly again, clear and exalted.

“You said something about ‘yarns,’ Phronie,” Silver said. “Do you mean things that fellow at the station last night has said about me?”

It was odd, she reflected, that Sophronia had not referred to him since that scene at the depot. So far as Silver knew, she had not spoken of the ugly incident to anyone in the family. And yet, surely, the Willards would hear of it! A strange person, this sister of Jim’s.

Sophronia hesitated for a moment. “Well, there’s no use tryin’ to hide from you what you’ll find out for yourself anyhow, sooner or later. You know what people are, just as well as I do. When they’ve got nothing to do, they’ll talk.”

“I should think they’d have done all their talking about Dad Jim long ago,” Silver observed. “There never was much of a secret—”

“Did you see that Duke Melbank when he was in Chicago this summer?” Sophronia interrupted.

“Dad said he came into our place one night, but I don’t remember seeing him. So many people used to come and go.”

“Well, he ain’t worth rememberin’. But he has been talkin’ since he came back. I’d been wantin’ to put him in his place all along, and I was tickled to get the chance last night.”

Silver laughed ruefully. “Was he talking about dad?”

“Well—mostly about you.”

Color rushed into Silver’s cheeks. “About me? What does that creature know about me?”

Sophronia smiled reassuringly. “Some people talk most when they know least. As far as I can make out—the boys have been tellin’ me—Duke don’t say so much, but he hints plenty. There was a friend of Jim’s, wasn’t there? A fellow by the name of Lucas, I think.”

“Gerald Lucas,” Silver said, with her eyes fixed upon the downward slope of the hill. “I met him six months ago. Two months ago—I thought I wanted to marry him.”

“What manner of fellow was he?” Phronie asked, conversationally.

“Gerald used to practice law out West, but he got into some sort of trouble and was disbarred. Now he’s against the world—and the world is against him.”

Sophronia nodded sagely. “I guess I understand. Them outcasts appeal to women. I’m glad you got away from him without anything worse happenin’.”

Silver’s eyes darted to her aunt’s face. Her heart sank. A little door had closed upon her, shutting her in with her own knowledge. Sophronia was of another world, a good woman, placidly taking it for granted that her niece was still virtuous. Over the bleak loneliness that welled up within her, Silver resolved that it was better not to disillusion Phronie. After all, she need never know.

“Yes,” Silver said breathlessly, looking away, “I might have married him. That would have been worse. But I told dad how I felt about him—and I knew as soon as I had told him that I’d rather die than marry Gerald. I can’t explain it to you, Phronie. When I was away from him, I almost hated him. But as soon as he came back I was—well, I just can’t explain it. I—I was sort of hypnotized.”

“So that was why Jim decided to leave it all, eh?” Phronie asked with surprising shrewdness. “Duke Melbank has been tellin’ it around that he seen you with him that night in Chicago, and you seemed kind o’ stuck on him. I thought maybe Jim would have the sense to get you out of a mess like that.”

The unpleasant feeling of being forced into discretion tightened about Silver. She bit her lip and smiled desolately.

“Yes,” she said in a dull voice. “He wanted to get away because of me—partly. You see—he never seemed to realize that I was growing up.”

“That would be like Jim!” Phronie exclaimed and wiped her eyes. “Land sakes—let’s not talk about it any more. You’re here—safe with me, you poor child! It’s a shame, that’s what it is, your bein’ brought up around such people! But never you mind—everything’s all right from now on.”

She brought her tremendous long arm down about Silver’s shoulders, drew her awkwardly toward her for an instant, then got mightily to her feet.

“Well,” she blurted out, “you take a walk around and get acquainted with the place. But mind you don’t get too warm out here in the sun. I’ll go down and fix dinner.”

Silver watched the tall, gaunt woman stride away toward the house, her high-crowned straw hat tilting forward over her brow, her bun of black hair a rigid projection at the back. Then she walked to the eastern slope of the hillside and seated herself. In the field below the great black horses were being unhitched from the binder and led toward the barn. She saw Roddy run his hand down one shining black shoulder, and observed that in the act there was compassion, affection. In his attitude toward herself, last night, she thought unhappily, there had been little more than chilly formality. He had been polite enough, it was true, but far from cordial.

Well, she would not bother him. This was her *place*, in a deeper sense than it could ever be his. It was too soon for her to make any plan, any pattern, for her life from now on. But for the time being she would remain here, let Roddy Willard bring home a hundred wives who disapproved of her. Whatever had been beautiful and unmarred in the spirit of Jim Grenoble was still here—the pure and inviolable ghost of the boy who had known this earth.

For a long time her eyes brooded down over the strong, bright land. The slope was stilled in noon-day heat, each yellowing blade of grass, each small sunflower and early gentian stood crisp and unmingled by any stir of air. The drone of insects seemed like the murmur of eternity, golden, unbroken. The floating silken filament of milkweed down and the poised blue ray of a dragonfly were enclosed in this sphere of enchantment, of dreamlike continuity. Silver felt herself enclosed with it, without any desire for release. She needed this land that held the very roots of her being—she needed it to obliterate forever the dread and insecurity and violence of that other life, and the memory of Gerald Lucas.

Roddy had brought the horses to the watering tank, and as he glanced up at her on the slope she looked quickly away.

His dog, the black shaggy animal called “Noah,” was frisking about Roddy’s overalled legs. Presently Roddy came up the slope toward her with long, swinging strides, the dog at his heels.

In the suddenness of their encounter last night, she had not really seen Roddy, she thought. Now she observed him with a cool sense of detachment and indifference. He was bareheaded, and his dark, rough-looking hair clung in a damp mat to his scalp. His face was blunt-hewn, his cheekbones and brows prominent; although his gray eyes were deep-set and unsmiling, they were widely spaced so that the upper part of his face had a surprised, boyish look; his nose was high-bridged and seemed almost square with its well-defined nostrils; his mouth above the obstinate jaw was unexpectedly mobile. He was darkly burned, and beads of perspiration margined his forehead.

She watched him while he took out a handkerchief, mopped his brow and settled his long body down beside her. He gave her an odd smile.

“I came up here to apologize for the way I acted last night, Silver,” he said, and seemed to hesitate on her name.

“You were all right,” she replied. His palpable embarrassment made her feel ill at ease.

“I acted like a half-wit,” he insisted curtly. “If it isn’t too late, I want to tell you how glad I am that you came straight here—to Sophronia.”

He flushed a little, and Silver looked at him wonderingly.

“Thank you,” she said simply.

His mouth drew to a straight line. “You are very polite,” he remarked. “I didn’t feel exactly polite toward you—last night. I—well, I had other things on my mind.”

The dog, Noah, flung himself, panting, on the ground beside her. Silver ruffled her fingers through his dense fur.

“Of course,” she said. “Phronie told me about it this morning. I hope you will be very happy.”

“Thanks.” He looked away for a moment. “That was part of it, I admit. The rest can wait.”

“You mean—about the land?”

“I don’t want to trouble you with that business right away,” he replied heavily. “But you’ll probably want to sell and get your money out of it as soon as you can. The rent we’ve been paying isn’t much. Phronie told me

you said you want to stay here with her, but I don't believe you will for long."

"What makes you think that?" she asked directly.

Roddy pulled a tuft of dry grass, and crumpled it in his hand.

"I may be wrong," he said, "but I don't think this sort of life will appeal to you."

She regarded him with darkly brooding eyes.

"You may as well be honest with me, Roddy," she said slowly, "even if you don't know me very well. I asked Phronie what you would think of my living here—but I don't think she told me the truth. You don't want me here, do you?"

His startled frown gave way at once to a look of perplexed dismay.

"That's a fine question to ask me, Silver," he replied with a brusque laugh, "just after I've apologized to you for my stupidity last night—"

"I don't mean that," she broke in hastily. "I know you mean to be kind—and—and you feel sorry for me, and that sort of thing. But deep down—you resent my owning half this land, you resent my right to be here. And you are afraid of what your wife will think of me."

Their eyes met and held for a steady moment, blue burning into tense gray.

Roddy took a firm grip on his emotions before he replied. This, he reasoned, was no time to give vent to his own sentiments. The girl had come through an ordeal that would have prostrated almost anyone. Her resiliency was amazing. Intuitively he knew that it was not hardness in her. He looked at her curiously, and strove to speak as he would to a child who was in error.

"I'll confess to your first charge," he said gravely, "up to a point. I've worked your father's land since I was a kid. I've always looked forward to the day when it would be my own property. I was afraid last night that I was going to lose it. But as for resenting your right to be here—I'm not quite as mean as all that, Silver." He paused and looked away with misgiving as he sought for the right words in defense of Corinne. All morning the question of how she would accept Silver Grenoble had plagued him, to his shame. His doubts implied a lack of trust in Corinne's generosity that was mortifying.

"And as for the girl I am going to marry," he resumed resolutely, "you might wait until you meet her before you jump at any unfair conclusions. You are probably over-sensitive—" He halted, hating to put into words what was in his mind.

But Silver leaned back on her palms, threw back her head and uttered a dry little laugh. Roddy glanced at her uneasily and saw that the fringes of her lowered lashes were wet. He felt suddenly ponderous, inadequate, uncomfortable in the extreme. But the very unchildish expression of her face at that moment filled him with a sort of awed annoyance.

“I know what I’m talking about, Roddy, never fear,” she said softly. “I had one friend after another in boarding schools, until their mothers looked up my background. But for all that—” Her eyes widened brilliantly, and her full, sweet lips parted in a serene smile. “—I wouldn’t have given up one single day with my father.”

“Everybody who knew him round here thought highly of him,” Roddy said, recovering himself. “I’m sorry I never met him. Of course I was only a boy then, and our farm was miles away from here.”

Silver turned abruptly toward him. A change had come over her face, a guarded, secret look.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “I didn’t mean to speak of—of my life before I came here. I don’t want you—any of you—to think that I’ve had a hard time of it. I—I really haven’t. It was all splendid, in a way—but you would never understand that. But this—” She moved her hand lightly before her and gazed down on the land below. “—this is what I want now. I want to be here, where my father was happy. I don’t think he ever really was—afterward. So you see you are quite wrong if you believe I won’t want to stay.”

Roddy thought of Duke Melbank and his mouth twisted in wry silence.

“Phronie,” Silver went on, musingly, “probably didn’t tell you what happened at the depot last night in Heron River, did she?”

He gave her a startled glance. “No. She didn’t mention anything out of the ordinary.”

“Well, you’ll probably hear about it. I suppose it’s the kind of thing that keeps a small town talking for a long time. But I’ll tell you to prove to you that I’m not going to be scared away.”

With ironical brevity she related the occurrence at the depot the evening before, while Roddy sat in stiff silence. When she had finished, she drew up her slender legs and clasped her hands in front of her, and looked pensively down at the glimmering fields.

Roddy, under his tan, had turned livid with wrath. He gave vent to an oath that shook his voice. Then he got abruptly to his feet and extended his hand to Silver.

“Come,” he said harshly. “Let’s go down to the house.”

She stood for a moment looking coolly up into his eyes. “I know now,” she said, “why Phronie didn’t tell you. I don’t think there’s any use in your getting into a rage about that person. You see—people will just have to get used to me, Roddy. They can get used to anything.”

“I’ll use my own judgment about Duke Melbank,” he replied blackly, and taking her arm he led her in silence down the slope to the house.

Jason, meeting them in the yard, looked at his brother with a whimsical smile.

“Old Shad Finney just called up,” he reported in his soft voice. “He thought maybe we’d like to know that Duke Melbank left town last night.”

It was Jason, unfathomable and dark and silent, who drove Silver and Sophronia two days later on that last quiet errand for Gentleman Jim Grenoble. Without ritual or dirge, Jim’s ashes were scattered into the open soil above Anna Grenoble’s grave, and when the dark earth-wound was closed again a single yellow poplar leaf drifted down upon it and lay as though sealing what was done.

Jason said, “Trees know.”



CHAPTER SIX

DURING the week, Silver had made herself acquainted with every nook and cranny on the place, except for Jason's abode in the attic of the new house, and Roddy's "laboratory" beneath the western slope of the hill.

There had been nothing to restrain her from entering either of the rooms, but because Sophronia, in her way, had spoken of them as being apart, in purpose, from the rest, Silver had been waiting for the brothers to invite her into their sanctuaries. And no invitation had come.

In respect to Jason's studio in the attic, Silver had little curiosity. She could imagine, fairly well, what it would be. But why had Roddy not invited her into that log shack below the hill, where, she guessed, all his ambitions were hidden?

On the day before Roddy was to leave for Ballantyne to marry Corinne Meader, Sophronia and Silver put up the last crisp curtain in the old house. The pine floors and moulding had been scrubbed white, the rag rugs washed, the horse-hair sofa and settee in the sitting room treated with gasoline. Beds and bedding had been moved down from the big house, and other essentials had been bought in Heron River.

Silver was grateful for Sophronia's permission to share in this activity. At first her aunt had expressed a good-natured skepticism as to Silver's usefulness, but by the end of the week she was ready to admit that the smooth fingers of Jim's daughter were not mere ornaments. Now and then she would think with compunction that she was letting the girl overdo, but Silver appeared not to heed her protests. There was a strange, enthralled air about her as she moved through the rooms of the old stone house, and once or twice Sophronia came upon her gazing with rapt fixity at the heavily beamed ceiling or the white-washed walls.

"I declare!" Phronie said in private to old Roderick. "If I didn't know she was flesh and blood, I'd swear she was the ghost of some Grenoble woman come back and lookin' things over, pleased-like!"

“Bosh,” said Roderick prosaically. “She’s just so tickled to be in a healthy place, that’s all.”

“Well,” Phronie replied, unconvinced, “I have a queer feeling that she belongs here more than we do, and in a different way.”

“You’re daft, woman,” her husband said affectionately, and put his arm about her generous shoulders.

Sophronia went to the narrow stair-well that rose almost vertically from the kitchen and called to Silver, who was putting the finishing touches on her own bedroom above, the room that had belonged to her mother. Silver had bought cretonnes and yellow paint for it, and Sophronia had regarded the result with awe. “It’s real pretty and mannerable,” she had said.

“Come down and have a bite o’ supper, Silver,” she called.

When Silver appeared, Sophronia glanced out the back door. “There’s Roddy,” she remarked, “goin’ into that old shop of his. Wonder if he don’t know it’s supper time. He’s been actin’ awful funny today.”

Roderick, who was already seated in his place at the table, looked up with a twinkle across his newspaper.

“I acted sort o’ funny myself, the day before I was married to you, Phronie,” he recalled. “I went to town and bought six red silk handkerchiefs, and never heard the last of it from you.”

Phronie sniffed. “That didn’t cure you none,” she observed.

Silver had come and was standing beside her at the open door. “I’d like to see the inside of Roddy’s workshop,” she said. “Do you suppose he’d mind if I went up now and called him to supper?”

“Like as not,” Phronie replied with a tolerant smile. “He probably thought you weren’t interested in it. He’s got everything in saucers and little bags and glass jars—with tags and labels and figgers—till it would make you dizzy to look at ’em.”

“His corn has won a number of prizes, though, hasn’t it?”

“They’re all in there, too. That corn he grew last year was two weeks earlier than anything else in the district. Now he’s crossin’ it with a good yielder to bring it up to where it’ll grow as much to the acre as the other stuff. Oh, I don’t pretend to know half of what he’s talkin’ about, let alone what he’s doin’.”

Jason came down the slope from the barns, and Silver slipped out to fetch Roddy.

She stood hesitantly for a moment in the open doorway of his workshop, and watched him where he bent over a long plank table, the late sunlight

from the window laddering down over his unruly dark head and his broad shoulders. On each of a half dozen white pasteboard cards on the table there was a sprinkling of what seemed to be corn kernels, and so intent was Roddy on the specimens before him that he was unaware of her until she spoke.

“I’m sorry to disturb you, Roddy,” Silver said, “but supper’s ready.”

“Oh!” He glanced up absently. Then his gaze seemed to become arrested upon her; but she knew that it was the concentrated stare of a person whose thoughts are hard on something else. “That ought to work!” he exclaimed under his breath, and she saw him go to a filing cabinet in a corner, remove a sheaf of papers and jot down some memorandum.

Silver was about to turn away when he called her.

“Why don’t you come in and look this place over?” he enquired. “Girls are usually bored with it—but since you have an interest in it—” He laughed in an odd way and came toward her.

“I’d love to know all about it,” she said as she glanced around the room. “But Phronie is waiting for us. Couldn’t we come in later?”

“Well,” he replied apologetically, “I’ve got to go to town for a hair-cut—and I have my packing to do yet tonight.” He grinned boyishly down at her. “Corinne’ll get used to seeing me like this, I s’pose, but on my wedding day I ought to try not to look like a member of the House of David.”

Silver laughed and glanced up at his rumpled hair. A cool, unfamiliar feeling passed over her and, frowning, she looked away from him.

“But Jason can show you around,” he went on hastily. “He wants you to see his studio, too. And that’s something, for Jase! I can’t remember when he’s asked anybody into that place.”

They had come to the screen door of the kitchen, and Jason opened it for them.

“You don’t seem to be in any hurry to come to the ‘last supper,’ ” Jason remarked drily.

“None of your irreverence, young man!” Roddy cried, and prodded his brother jovially in the ribs. “You have a serious job on your hands tonight. You’ve got to show this child my lair—and your own. Her mind has a scientific as well as an artistic turn—eh, what, Silver?”

He grasped the soft coil of hair at the nape of her neck and gave it a playful tug.

“Hope you feel as spry tomorrow as you do tonight, young feller,” Steve, the hired man, said, as he dried his face on the roller towel beside the sink.

“Are you bunch comin’ to supper, or to breakfast?” Sophronia demanded, and planted herself with force at the foot of the long, blue- and white-checked table.

A misty sensation of gratitude, of deep, quivering happiness pervaded Silver as she partook of the simple meal with these people who were, through Sophronia, closer to her than anyone else on earth. But far down, underneath, there was a stirring of something uncertain, something winged and light and strange. She found herself wondering, time after time, what kind of person Roddy Willard would bring home as his wife.

“My God!” Jason said, peering out through the muslin curtains of the sitting room in the old house. “They have a retinoo!”

Silver, standing at his elbow, looked at the people getting out of Roddy’s car where it had drawn up on the driveway in front of the wide porch of the new house on the hill. She clasped Jason’s arm.

“The big girl must be a servant, Jason,” she said. “Phronie told me Corinne was small.”

“Sure,” he replied. “That’s Corinne with the fox fur on. Kind o’ warm for it, but I guess it’s the style. She’s pretty, isn’t she? But that other one—say! She looks like a Mackintosh Red!”

Silver giggled. She saw that Sophronia, white piqué dress still crisp, black velvet ribbon still about her long throat, was walking sedately down the steps to greet Roddy and his wife. Old Roderick, his birchwood cane in hand, was following her a bit diffidently.

“We must go up and meet them, Jason,” said Silver.

But her eyes lingered a moment longer on Corinne, Roddy’s wife. She was small and exquisitely formed, with negligible trinkets of feet, and a scantily hatted little head poised eagerly as she went forward to accept Sophronia’s blundering kiss and old Roderick’s hand-clasp. Two objects dropped to the ground as she made that light forward step. One was her silver-fox fur, the other was a red Pomeranian, no bigger than a tea-cup.

Noah, Roddy’s dog, at once proceeded, with some difficulty, to make the acquaintance of the newcomer.

A painful sound came from Jason’s throat. “Lord!” he muttered. “I could cry. Corinne has no idea what she’s—”

“Oh, Jason,” Silver protested, “it will be all right. When people are in love—they can adjust themselves to anything.”

“We’ve got to be damn nice to her, Silver. The poor little thing!”

Everybody was in the living room when Silver and Jason entered the new house. Roddy, with only a trace of self-consciousness, brought Corinne, with his arm linked in hers, up to his brother and Silver while they stood in the doorway.

“You’ve met Jason, Corrie,” he said. “This is Silver Grenoble. Silver—Corinne. Did I get it backwards? I usually do; remember, Corrie? She used to laugh at my manners, you know, Silver. But what’s manners between friends?” He laughed, and Silver extended her hand to Corinne, who took it with a quaint little moue upward toward her tall husband.

“He’s slandering me, Silver,” Corinne declared. “I never had anything but admiration for him, the wretch!”

Jason bent forward in an almost courtly fashion as he shook Corinne’s hand. “Welcome home,” he said, with a dark shine in his eyes.

“I’ve got a lunch laid out in the dining room if you’ll all come,” Sophronia announced. “It ain’t much, but I know what Roddy is after a trip —”

“Oh, Mrs. Willard!” Corinne pleaded. “May I be excused? I feel so very gritty”—she thrust out her small, pink palms, from which the gray suède gloves had been rolled back to the wrists—“all I want is a good hot bath.”

Sophronia’s face fell in disappointment. Silver had helped her make the fancy moulds of fruit gelatine that had reposed all day in the cooler. She knew, too, how long Phronie had labored over the devilled eggs and the special mayonnaise dressing, not to mention the angel cake with its greeting in pink icing on the top.

“Maybe you’ll feel more like having a bite after you’ve washed?” Phronie suggested hopefully.

Corinne shook her head mournfully. “I’m so sorry, Mrs. Willard. It has been so hot driving today. Oh—Roddy! Paula went upstairs with our bags, didn’t she? Perhaps she would like something to eat. Do you mind calling her?”

He went out, and Corinne caught up the little fluff of bright fur that had been panting on the floor near her.

“Poor, hot little Macbeth! Does he want a bath, too?”

“Why do you call him ‘Macbeth’?” Silver asked.

Corinne laughed. “Oh, just to give him dignity,” she explained. “And besides—he has had many hardships, poor dear. Colic—distemper— Oh, there’s my precious Paula!” Then in a hasty aside she added, “We picked her

up only this afternoon in an employment office in Maynard, but I suspect she's a jewel."

Paula entered the living room, and while Corinne, playfully democratic, introduced her to Silver and Jason, Silver found her interest quickened by the German girl's appearance. She was Junoesque in build, with vast thighs and breasts and shoulders. Her legs and arms were almost breath-taking when she walked. Silver thought she had never seen anything more beautiful than her corn-silk hair, which was plaited in a coronet across her head. Her face was round, rosy and placid, but far from vacant.

"Please-to-meet you," said Paula to Silver, as she made a prodigious curtsey.

But it was Jason's eyes, fastened on Paula, that really startled Silver. Corinne, however, was taking no note of his reactions. She was glancing about at the walls of the living room in an appraising way.

"Funny," she said with a deprecating little laugh, "I feel as though I am in a different house from the one I remember. I love these etchings, Roddy dear!"

Sophonria vanished suddenly into the dining room, and Silver, feeling that Corinne was utterly unaware of her presence, wished that she might decently follow her.

"I thought they were good," Roddy told Corinne modestly. "But if Jason wasn't so bashful about hanging his work—"

"There's a tankful of hot water, Corinne," Jason broke in. "We thought you might want a bath."

Corinne blinked at him in a bewildered way, and Silver had the distinct feeling that she was not really looking at him.

When they were alone together in their room, Corinne, halfway through the hundred brush strokes she was giving her hair, looked at Roddy with shrinking eyes.

"Do you mean," she asked breathlessly, "that Jason is going to stay—with us?"

A painful flush mounted to Roddy's temples.

"Why, of course, darling," he stammered. "Lord—you don't mean—you don't dislike him, do you?"

Her small hands gathered over the brush on her knees.

"No," she said softly. "No—of course not."

Roddy got up impulsively, knelt beside her and drew her toward him.

“Corrie!” he pleaded. “I can see how you feel about him. But I tell you, darling, he’s the finest soul in the world. And he’s an artist, Corrie. He really is. You ought to see his work. If we only had enough money, I’d send him out to study. He has his studio all fixed up in the attic. It would be impossible for me to suggest that he should move. My God, Corrie—I couldn’t! Please, sweetheart, try to like him!”

A trembling little smile passed over her lips. Closing her eyes, she leaned her head back against Roddy’s shoulder.

“I’m sorry, Roddy,” she murmured. “Of course I’ll like him.”

In anguish, Roddy kissed her. Then he kissed her again, and she drew a lock of her scented hair across his lowered eyes.



CHAPTER SEVEN

AUGUST rested upon the earth like a burnished link between summer and fall. In the evenings when their work was done, old Roderick and Steve would often sit in the home-made birch chairs under the big oak tree in front of the old house with Jason, who invariably came down after supper. Usually, the supper dishes done, Silver joined them.

One twilight old Roderick pointed with his pipe up at the “big” house, where young Roddy lived with his wife Corinne.

“You know,” he said whimsically, “maybe I’m gettin’ on, but I swear that house ain’t sitting right on the ground. It’s up in the air a little more every night I look at it—and farther east, too.”

Silver laughed with Jason and Steve.

“It ain’t likely to go much higher with that big hired girl they have in it,” Steve observed drily.

Jason cleared his throat. “Oh, I don’t know that she’s so big,” he said. “She has better ankles and feet than most girls in Heron River.”

He took his harmonica from his pocket and tapped it gently in the palm of his hand.

“Sure,” said Steve. “Paula’s all right. Works too hard, though, to my way o’ thinkin’. It sorts o’ gets on my nerves to see breakfast bein’ drug up every morning to a perfectly healthy critter like that Co-reen. Think I’ll be movin’ on soon if it keeps up.”

No one paid any attention to him. For thirty years or more in the employ of the Willards, he had been threatening for one reason or another to leave.

*In the blue ridge mountains of Virginia
On the trail of the lonesome pine . . .*

Silver hummed softly to Jason’s playing and stretched out full length on the birch bench, a cushion beneath her head. She felt tired after the long day’s work in the garden with Sophronia. Her feet ached with a kindly, pleasant sort of ache.

Lamps were being lighted in the big house on the slope. Every evening the windows bloomed one after the other with this yellow radiance, soon after sundown. But for a moment only. Then all the shades were drawn. Even when Roddy and his wife were away visiting friends of Corinne's at the lake cottages up north, the lamps burned just the same. Sophronia had observed that it was a waste of fuel, but Corinne could not bear to return to a dark house.

Phronie opened the door and called out to them. "I wish one of you youngsters would run up and borrow some cinnamon for me. I've started to make cookies—"

"Can't you ever rest, ma?" Jason said, getting to his feet.

"I want to get it done while it's cool," Phronie said. "It'll be hot again tomorrow. Run along and don't fuss."

"I'll go, Jase," Silver said quickly. "You stay here and play."

While she went lightly up the slope, she thought again, as she had countless times during the past weeks, of Corinne's baffling attitude toward Roddy's brother. She appeared to be cordiality itself toward him; was, in fact, almost glib with sisterly solicitude. Perhaps that was the trouble, Silver reflected. For through it all Silver had had the distinct feeling that Corinne was deliberately shutting poor Jason out of her consciousness. She feared, too, that Jason sensed this, and often wondered how long his pride or perverse humor would sustain him under the same roof with his brother's wife.

Then there was Paula. But Jason was too diffident and Paula too shy for the development, as yet, of any friendship between them which might be embarrassing to Corinne. Only yesterday, however, Corinne had called Paula sharply away from the yard where she was watching Jason repair a corn-crib, and had set her to some trivial and unnecessary task.

When Silver entered Roddy's house, she found Corinne writing letters in the living room. The radio was playing a soft dance tune, and Roddy, at the dining room table, was at work over his ledger.

"Phronie wants to borrow some cinnamon, Corinne," Silver explained when Roddy's wife enquiringly turned her head. "I can find it myself in the kitchen."

"Oh," Corinne said inattentively. "Paula will be down in a minute. She's upstairs—tidying her hair, I suppose. She'll find the cinnamon for you. I'm sure I don't know where she keeps it."

A quick pucker of amusement appeared on Roddy's forehead.

"Silver isn't helpless," he remarked. "Can't she look for it?"

“If you don’t mind, Roddy,” Corinne said with faint annoyance, “I’d rather have Paula get it for her. It’s her kitchen, after all. Do sit down, Silver. I must get these letters finished.”

Silver picked up a current copy of *Vanity Fair*, to which Corinne had subscribed before her marriage, and seated herself in the dining room. Roddy gave her an odd, vaguely troubled look, then dropped his eyes again to his ledger.

But immediately there was the sound of a car entering the driveway, and Corinne, with a glance of impatience toward the stairs down which Paula should have come, went herself to answer the doorbell.

“I’d better go home,” Silver said quickly to Roddy.

A gleam of anger lit Roddy’s eyes. “You stay where you are,” he commanded. “Didn’t you tell me people round here had to get used to you?”

Silver had no time to make a reply.

A tall, granite-faced woman with a mottled red nose and a hat that bore a stiff little feather, entered the living room. In her wake, not unlike the trailing ruffle of a great ship, came a simpering miss of seventeen or eighteen, much befuddled, and wearing a flowered leghorn hat.

It was Mrs. Leander Folds, the school-superintendent’s wife of Heron River, and her daughter Ethelwyn. Sophronia had pointed them out to Silver only yesterday in the village, as they had driven past in their car. The Folds women had looked the other way, but that could possibly have been an accident.

“My dear,” Mrs. Folds was saying loquaciously, “I suppose I should have telephoned. But I am a woman of impulse, you know! We just got back yesterday from our holiday in the Black Hills, and *heard* about Roddy’s marriage. We were out driving, and I thought this would be a good time to catch you in. We must—we just *must* have you in our Reading Club. Ethelwyn here is secretary of it, and it’s so instructive for the young people —”

Mrs. Folds had advanced farther into the room, and now her eye fell upon Silver. A curious, tight look appeared on her face as though she were holding her breath. Silver stood up.

“Have you met Silver Grenoble, Mrs. Folds?” Corinne asked hastily. “My husband’s cousin.”

“How do you do?” Silver said, but made no move toward the two visitors.

“Oh—” Mrs. Folds surveyed her thoroughly. “How do you do? Roddy’s cousin by—by marriage? Of course. Yes, yes. And how do you do, Roddy? Oh, dear. I just thought of something.” She turned abruptly and patted Ethelwyn’s arm. “Run and see if I brought that book I wanted Mrs. Willard to read. It ought to be in the car. If it isn’t, wait for me there, my dear.”

Ethelwyn vanished docilely, although her eyes a moment before had been frankly devouring Silver. Silver could feel the hot blood pounding in her throat, her temples. Mrs. Folds’ strategy had been so brutally obvious. Yet she was powerless to move.

“Now,” said Mrs. Folds, “I can’t stay a minute—but you must promise to come to our meeting on Tuesday, Mrs. Willard. We are studying Hardy at the moment—with one of the moderns thrown in, just for relief, so to speak.” She smiled apologetically.

Roddy gave a sardonic bark of a laugh. “Hardy? You don’t consider him a modern, eh?”

Mrs. Folds looked bewildered. Corinne agitatedly stepped closer to her and said, “Thank you so much, Mrs. Folds. I shall be glad to come, indeed. Do you meet every week?”

“Every week, rain or shine! ‘The mind is the kingdom,’ as Campbell says. I’m sure you will find our little group very stimulating. Some of them are very young, but then you’re young yourself. Remember—we live right next to the schoolhouse. Now I must run. You have a charming wife, Roddy. You lucky boy!” Mrs. Folds shook a roguish finger at him. “Take good care of her!”

“By the way, Mrs. Folds,” Roddy said coldly, his face curiously white beneath his tan, his eyes two grayly burning slits, “has this club of yours a limited membership?”

Mrs. Folds reddened unbecomingly. “Er—yes, it has,” she plunged. “You see—our house is small—”

Silver stood with her hands clenched about the table’s edge, back of her.

“That’s fortunate,” Roddy interrupted Mrs. Folds, and laughed aloud. With that he slammed shut the covers of the ledger, flung it with a sharp report down upon the table and strode through the dining room into the kitchen.

Mrs. Folds smiled feebly and extended two fingers to Corinne. As though across waves of heat, Silver saw Mrs. Folds sail out of the house, Corinne accompanying her.

Paula had come down the back stairs. She entered the dining room now and handed Silver the can of cinnamon. Silver was suddenly aware of

Roddy standing before her with crossed arms.

“You’ll find this place isn’t worth the trouble, kid,” he said somberly. “The women will knife you—every chance they get.”

She gave him a steady look. “Mrs. Folds can’t hurt me—really,” she said with a proud lift of her head.

Roddy’s lips moved in a hard way. “That isn’t all of it,” he continued. “I meant to tell you when you first came in, but I didn’t get a chance. That man Gerald Lucas was enquiring about you today in Heron River.”

For a moment Silver leaned heavily against the table. Her eyes were fixed wide upon Roddy’s face, as though she expected to hear him repeat his words.

Corinne came blithely in through the front of the house.

“What an ogre of a woman!” she cried, laughing. “I’m glad you snubbed her, Roddy. I couldn’t very well, because I thought she meant to invite—”

“Phronie is waiting for the cinnamon, Corinne,” Silver said dully. “I must go.”

But it was Jason who took the spice into the house to Sophronia. Silver felt that she could not, right now, bear the interior of the stone house, even for a moment.

“I’m going for a walk,” she told Jason.

“A walk?” he asked, and frowned.

But Silver broke away and started for the road. She thrust her hands into the pockets of her sweater and walked blindly into the last sinking glow of the sunset. The road swung south; a thicket caught the light and where a wild vine trailed over it the grape clusters burned blue and cool. On her right, Silver saw the warm blur of ripe fields of wheat, then stiff phalanxes of dim-lit corn. This light was a flow of dark peace.

Presently a long, graceful roadster turned the corner and came toward her. As it slowed down and stopped beside her, the man at the wheel laughed with pleased surprise and leaned over the door. Silver glanced up at him.

The man was Gerald Lucas.



CHAPTER EIGHT

FOR an instant, as Gerald climbed down from his car and stepped toward her, Silver contemplated flight. Instead, when the impulse had passed, she thrust her hands into her pockets and looked coolly up at him.

Gerald seized her hands. “Silver—what’s the matter with you?” he demanded.

She caught her breath. “It’s so funny,” she said with difficulty, “—your coming here just now.”

“What’s so funny about it?”

She withdrew her hands from his. “You wouldn’t understand, Gerald, even if I told you,” she replied. “It’s like running away from a deep sea—and running smack into the devil.”

A humorous twist appeared upon Gerald’s left eyebrow. “Well—if you think I’m the devil, I certainly *don’t* understand,” he said, and stepped back beside his car. “Get in and we’ll take a drive and talk things over.”

“No,” Silver said firmly, “I don’t want to go driving—and I have nothing to talk over, Gerald.”

He put his hand lightly on her arm and drew her toward the car. “Listen to me, Silver,” he urged. “What’s got into you? I didn’t come out here to kidnap you, though I’d like to. You’ve grown even more luscious—if that’s possible. Sit in the car and let’s talk.”

For a moment she hesitated, then with a shrug she got into the car.

“I’ll drive you up to the house, if you like, and make it all respectable and on the level,” he suggested drily as he got into the seat beside her.

“That isn’t necessary,” Silver replied.

“I get you, darling. What you mean is—it wouldn’t be wise, eh? I wouldn’t make much of a hit with the home folks, I guess. Well, maybe you’re right, at that.”

“It isn’t that, Gerald,” she told him. She surveyed him with detachment, and wondered what had happened to her since she had last seen him. He was

as rakishly good-looking as ever. His dark head was as well-groomed and arrogantly provocative, his small, clipped mustache as nonchalant, his eyes as full of confidence and meaningful laughter as ever. But it was as though she looked at him now through an obscuring film.

From his pocket he took his gold and onyx cigarette case.

“Thanks, Gerald,” she said. “I’ll have one. I don’t smoke as much as I did, though.”

“Milk and eggs, now, eh?” he asked lightly.

“No—work. I don’t have time to smoke.”

Gerald looked critically down at her. “Well,” he remarked, “I can’t see that it’s hurt you any. Your mouth is like a piece of pomegranate, or something like that. But you should have known better than to try running away from me, sweetheart. You didn’t even give me a chance to tell you how sorry I was—about your father.”

“I’m trying to forget that,” Silver said briefly. “How did you find out where I had gone?”

He pinched her chin lightly and smiled. “Little Gerald finds out just about everything he wants to know. Old Ben Hubbard is a friend of mine. So I came out here and snooped around, before I looked you up. And lo and behold, I’ve got the very thing I’ve wanted for some time. A resort on Emerald Bay, my love! You see, I had a few grand salted away—”

“You had to get out of Chicago, didn’t you, Gerald?” Silver asked, and looked at him levelly.

The faintest glimmer of annoyance passed over his face. But, at that, it was annoyance tintured with amusement.

“Well, now, my dear,” he protested, “do we have to go into that? I’ll admit—things were getting warmish. But this—or these—are the wide open spaces. And here I am with a peach of a lay-out up on that lake. I’m going to swank it up for the shooting season, this fall. Besides, it’s right on the highway so I can keep it open for the winter trade. All I need now is a kiss from you, Silver.”

She drew back deliberately. “No.”

He looked at her narrowly, then leaned toward her with a darkened face. “I don’t quite follow you, Silver. I thought it was all fixed between us. I’ve been on the level with you, haven’t I? We’ve been everything to each other, haven’t we? Now, what’s it all about? I thought you ran away because of your father’s death. I couldn’t believe it was because of me, Silver. Honestly,

I thought you expected me to follow you. Well—I think you ought to do some of the talking.”

She had been staring vacantly past him at the darkening west. Some of the old fire was stirring within her at the sound of his voice and the nearness of him. But it was, she told herself with the deeper part of her consciousness, only the quick and vanishing fire of a will-o'-the-wisp. In some way she had changed. She was no longer swayed completely by Gerald Lucas.

“Yes, I ought to talk, Gerald. I know that,” she said. “But I don’t know how to tell you.” She brought her eyes even with his own. “It’s just that—I’ve got over all the—” She hesitated.

“Are you trying to tell me that you don’t love me any more?” he prompted.

“Oh, Gerald!” she cried in desperation. “Do you believe I ever loved you? Could you call that love—in that feverish atmosphere? You—you appealed to me in a certain way, that’s all. I know that now, Gerald. And I don’t want to go back to what I left behind me. I don’t want that kind of life—yours and—and dad’s.”

He looked at her hard, and she saw an almost wistful disappointment enter his eyes. He turned away and moved his hands thoughtfully back and forth across the lower curve of the wheel.

“Well—of course—that lets me out,” he said slowly. “But you happen to be the only girl I’ve ever wanted to marry, Silver. And I’m thirty-two now.” He was thoughtful for a moment. “Are you sure you won’t want to go back, after you’ve had a taste of this life? What, by the way, did you mean by ‘running away from a deep sea’?”

Her restless hands came tightly together in her lap.

“Oh,” she shrugged. “It wasn’t anything really serious. This evening a woman called on the wife of my aunt’s stepson—I know you’ll laugh at that, Gerald—anyhow, she looked down on me, because I’m *me*. But the people here aren’t all like her.”

Before he replied he looked at her seriously for a long moment. “Perhaps they aren’t,” he said finally. “But I can’t see Silver Grenoble living in a place like this. I know what these burgs are. I practised law in one of them when I first hung out my shingle. It’s all right for you to like it—but the place has to like you, remember, or it’s going to raise hell with you.”

“What reason have you for thinking the place won’t like me—after it gets acquainted with me?”

“Just a hunch, darling. Did you ever see a prize pup trying to make up to a pack of mongrels? It’s a lot of fun—if you don’t happen to care for the prize pup.”

“I’m taking that chance,” she retorted. “Anyhow—I don’t consider myself a prize pup. I have a good deal to live down, Gerald.”

He patted her interlocked fingers. “I’m sorry you feel that way about it, darling,” he said softly. “Guess I’m to blame.”

Silver’s free laugh rang out. “I should say you were not! If I do anything, it’s because I want to, whether it’s right or wrong!”

Gerald gave a low whistle. “There speaks Jim Grenoble!” he said soberly. “But I’ll believe you, Silver. And I wish you luck. If it doesn’t work out, I won’t be far away. At least not for a while. Do you want me to drive you up to the house? I’ll promise not to set foot on one little bit of your sacred—”

“Gerald!” Silver interrupted sharply. She thought quickly for a moment. “All right—drive me up.”

Quite abruptly and mysteriously, her relationship with Gerald Lucas had changed—had changed so that it seemed it had never existed. She felt bewildered in the knowledge. Less than a month ago, his very presence would have thrown her into a panic of wild emotion. Was it her father’s death that had made of her a different person, or was it this uncompromising landscape, in which Gerald and his kind seemed a little absurd? Both, perhaps. But there was something else, too—something which she could not pull up to the light of analysis.

Gerald was turning the car in at the Willard gate. And there, between the poplar trees that were defined vaguely against a moon that was like a rising red world, stood Corinne in her white dress.

Silver got out of the car. Gerald swung it about to leave immediately, but Corinne came toward it and stood for a moment in the glare of the lights. Silver looked at Corinne and then at Gerald. Suddenly, as she saw Gerald’s eyes dwelling upon that white figure standing in the light, there came an instant’s conviction, lucid and electrifying, that nothing would ever be the same again. Corinne stepped around to the side of the car.

“This is Gerald Lucas,” Silver said quickly, and hesitated.

Gerald smiled and put forth his hand. “And what’s the other half of it?” he asked.

“I’m Corinne Willard,” Corinne replied as she took Gerald’s hand.

He gave her the half-amused, searching look that Silver understood only too well.

“Corinne Willard?” Gerald repeated. “And where have you been all my life?”

“Where nice girls always are,” Corinne replied archly. “Living at home with mother.”

“Just a nice, old-fashioned girl,” Gerald bantered amiably. “Well, come along out to Emerald Bay some night when mother isn’t around. Bring her out with you, Silver.”

Silver stepped to the side of the car.

“Gerald,” she said, “you’re going to be late for your appointment. And besides—”

“Right-o, Silver!” Gerald put in immediately. “I was forgetting. See you both later.”

The car shot into the road and vanished beyond the thicket where the highway turned to the south.

“Well—I must say—you have a way of dismissing people—” Corinne observed.

“I just happen to know Gerald,” Silver said quietly.

“So I have heard,” Corinne remarked. “He’s not at all what I imagined him. And he is awfully good-looking, isn’t he?”

Silver was thoughtful for a moment.

“Corinne,” she said at last, “I don’t want Gerald around here at all.”

“Well, it’s no affair of mine, my dear,” Corinne said lazily, and began calling to her dog, who was exploring the underbrush on the hill.

Something deep within Silver trembled. She saw Corinne turn away and go toward the house. Then she thrust her hands into the pockets of her sweater and moved slowly down the pathway. From among the shadows under the great oak came the sound of Jason playing a quaint old lullaby. The music, mingling with the unbroken churring of the frogs, seemed to come from far away, from a past of half-remembered, half-forgotten things.



CHAPTER NINE

PHRONIE, the next day, was putting up apple butter, tomato and cucumber pickle and vegetable marrow. The threshing crew would be along tomorrow and a whole cupboard full of *flat-bröd* for the Norwegian “hands” had to be baked on top of the kitchen range. Silver was preparing paraffin for the full preserve jars that stood on the white-scrubbed pine table.

“Whew! It’s hot!” Phronie exclaimed, stepping away from the stove and wiping her face with her apron.

Silver took the paraffin pot to the table. “You don’t seem to notice it much when you’re working,” she said.

“Well, I notice it,” Phronie declared, and looked about her with her hands on her hips. “But it’s got to be done.”

“I rather like it,” Silver replied. “It’s like getting ready for a picnic.”

“It’s no picnic for me, I can tell you. I’ve been at it for more years than I like to remember. Though I sort of like it, as you say. And it wouldn’t ‘a’ hurt Corinne to give us a hand with it, to my way of thinkin’.”

“She probably would have done so,” Silver said, “if it hadn’t been for the meeting of that Reading Club in town.”

“Readin’ Club, my eye! Why can’t people do their readin’ at home, where they ought to? Corinne hasn’t been in her own house since she was married, exceptin’ to eat and sleep. And Roddy has been runnin’ round to parties and one thing or another till he’s dead on his feet.”

“When people are first married, Phronie, you can’t expect them to settle down right away.”

“I guess not. Though the Lord knows I did. But I wouldn’t want anybody to do it the way I did.” She busied herself again about the stove. “I suppose I could get Paula down to help us with some of this work if I asked her. It isn’t as though she has so much to do up there.”

“Why don’t you ask her, Phronie?”

Phronie sniffed. “Not me. If she was just a plain hired girl—but who ever heard of a ‘maid’ on a farm?”

Silver laughed. “Jason gets a lot of fun out of calling her ‘the hired girl.’ It annoys Corinne, and Paula actually seems to be flattered by it!”

“That reminds me,” Phronie said suddenly, frowning. “Jase got kind o’ sore at Corinne last night. It was when you were over to the Micheners. Jase told me just after Roddy and Corinne left for the dance at the lake. Corinne heard Jase ask Paula if she’d like to come up and see his pictures. He says she give him an awfully funny look and made Paula sit down and hem napkins. Then in a little while she asks Jase if it ain’t enough that Silver Grenoble admires his work. Jase felt kind o’ dumb for a minute, he says, and then it dawned on him that Corinne don’t want him to have anything to do with Paula because she’s the hired girl, perhaps! If that ain’t the limit!”

From the doorway, at that moment, Silver could see Jason driving the big black team hitched to a lumber wagon in through the upper gate.

“Jason has been so nice to Corinne,” she said thoughtfully. “I don’t see how she could do anything to hurt him. Did Paula go up finally, anyhow?”

“Sure she did!” Sophronia laughed. “And she thought his pictures were real pretty, too!” With brisk skill she moved a bubbling pot farther back on the stove. “Well, I’m talkin’ too much again! But I do know this fire is too darned hot!”

The next day the Erickson crew arrived with their red monster of a threshing machine. Just before sundown, Silver rode out to bring the cattle in from the pasture. On the way home she paused beside a stripped field of barley where the men were at work.

It was a scene which was to be limned forever upon her memory. The chatter of the engine, the drone of the machinery, and the raucous shouts of the men seemed only to accent the pure tranquillity of the evening. The stacks of barley were burnished to great cones of pink and copper in that unearthly light, and the stream of chaff flung against the red sun was like a spout of powdered gold.

Above the hum of the work came the sound of one of the men singing. Silver called the dog, old Noah, and sent him to turn back a couple of the cows that had wandered off into the brush. Then she relaxed into the saddle again and turned to watch the men at work.

A couple of them waved to her. Jason stood on one stack, pitching the sheaves to the man who fed the machine. Roddy stood beside the separator,

attending to the bagging of the grain as it flowed from the spout. He waved to her and Silver, waving back, remembered irrelevantly that Corinne had not been present at the midday meal. She had gone to luncheon at the Richters', in their cottage on Twin Deer Lake.

Silver shook her bridle rein and was about to turn away when she heard a scream from the field. She swung around quickly and saw Roddy jump toward a tow-headed youth who was standing near him. The engine stopped instantly and the men hurried to where Roddy was leaning over the boy. Silver slipped down from her horse and in a moment had crept under the fence and was beside Roddy. The boy had stumbled and caught two fingers of one hand in a cog-wheel of the thresher. The fingers were two bloody tatters hanging from the hand. The boy was lying on the ground now, his face a deathlike pallor under the sunburn, his lips writhing back from his clenched teeth.

"Where's the first-aid kit?" Roddy shouted to the men who were crowding about him.

Jason had already gone in search of it. "Damn it, we've forgotten it!" he called as he came running back.

Roddy looked up. "Has anyone a clean handkerchief?"

Nobody responded. Silver had knelt beside Roddy, who was keeping a vise-like grip on the bleeding hand.

"Use this, Roddy," she said quickly, and whipped off her clean white linen blouse. With her shoulders bared to the rosy light of the low sun, she tore the material into strips and gave them to Roddy while he made a bandage and a tourniquet for the boy's mangled hand.

"All right, Jimmie!" Roddy said at last, and lifted the boy gently to his feet. "Start the truck, Jason. You'd better go down to Maynard and let Doc Woodward attend to it."

In a minute the truck had rattled away, Sven Erickson himself seated in the back with his arm about the boy's shoulders. It had all happened so quickly, it seemed to Silver that she had scarcely drawn a breath. Roddy was coming back to her from the wagon that stood off a short distance from the threshing machine. He was carrying his own grimy leather jacket. The men had withdrawn to the other side of the separator and Silver could hear them talking now in low, sober voices. Roddy helped her into the jacket and while she buttoned it he stood looking down at her without a word. But her fingers trembled so now that fastening the buttons was almost impossible.

"Here, let me do that," Roddy said, and stepped toward her.

She permitted him to button the jacket up to her breast, while she thrust her hands down into the pockets in an effort to control their trembling.

“That wasn’t very pleasant, was it?” he said with a grim smile. “But those things happen now and then.” When she did not reply, he laid his hand on her shoulder. “You were a brick, Silver—to do what you did. But you’re pretty unstrung. Perhaps you’d better ride home in the wagon with me. Rusty will find his way back alone.”

In another moment, she knew, she would burst into nervous tears. Without looking at him she said hurriedly, “No, thanks, Roddy. I’m—all right.”

She turned away abruptly and rushed back to the fence, crawled under it and called to the horse, who had wandered off a short distance. Roddy’s dog had rounded up the cattle and had them started homeward.

All the way home, beneath Silver’s shuddering memory of the ragged clots of the boy’s fingers, dwelt the thought of Roddy’s dark face and his kindling, changed eyes.

While Roddy was washing in the tin basin on the bench outside the house—placed there for the use of the crew—Phronie came out of the kitchen. She had come up from the old house early to help Paula prepare the supper and set the table.

“What’s this I hear about the Healy boy?” she asked. “What happened?”

Roddy told her.

“Well, I declare it just seems something has to happen every year,” Phronie said. “And he’s such a nice boy, too. Well, hurry up and get washed. Supper is ready.”

“Is Corinne home yet?” Roddy asked.

“She’s upstairs changin’ her clothes. She got back in time to make a big salad for dinner—with a real nice French dressin’. Have you seen Silver anywhere? She went to fetch the cows, but I haven’t seen her since.”

Roddy told her then of the part Silver had played in getting the boy ready to go to Maynard with Jason.

“Well—that girl beats me!” Phronie declared. “But then—she’s just like her mother. I remember—”

“You’d better go in and look after things, ma,” Roddy interrupted.

Roddy finished washing and hurried into the house. The men had already seated themselves at the table in the dining room and Roddy

hastened upstairs to put on clean clothing before he sat down. On the landing he met Corinne. She was dressed in a clinging green chiffon gown that came almost to her beautifully shod feet.

“Hello, lovely!” he greeted her in a low voice.

She laughed and rumbled his hair. “There’s a corn roast and a dance over at the lake tonight, darling,” she told him. “I thought I might as well dress now. Aren’t you going to kiss me?”

Roddy grinned, then drew her to him and kissed her throat.

“You’ve washed already?” she asked, surprised. “Don’t tell me you washed in that tin basin outside.”

“Certainly. Why not? I’ve done it for years.”

“You have a bathroom upstairs, haven’t you?”

“Listen, kid,” he protested. “You don’t know it, but the men are funny about such things. I don’t want them to feel—well, you know what I mean.”

“I don’t know at all,” she objected. “I should think—”

He swung her to him and held her close for a moment. “You’re much too pretty to talk to me in that tone,” he remonstrated. “Go on down—I’ll be with you in a jiffy.”

But as soon as he had left her, his mood grew sober again. He could not forget young Jim Healy and his poor crushed hand. The kid couldn’t be more than sixteen. His family didn’t have a dollar to spare, either. He would have to do something for the boy. He frowned gloomily as he reflected upon how little money there was for any such emergency. Then, curiously, with an obscure lightening of his spirit, there came to him the vision of Silver Grenoble, in her riding breeches, kneeling there on the field in the sunset, her shoulders bare above a plain silk bodice. Perhaps he had been all wrong about her. Perhaps she belonged here as essentially as he did himself.

Roddy entered the dining room through the hall, Corinne having drawn the double doors to shut off the sitting room from the more-than-earthly aroma of the men who had worked all day in the fields. Before he took his place at the table, he glanced over at Corinne, daintily presiding at its head and smiling graciously upon her overalled and plaid-shirted guests. Phronie and Paula stood, one on either side of the table, serving the men when necessary, or replenishing some dish or other from the kitchen. Silver had remained at the stone house, to make supper for old Roderick, who had not been feeling well for the past week.

It was Corinne’s first appearance at table with the threshing crew. Roddy chuckled to himself as he observed the men’s shyness in the presence of

Corinne gradually give way to their hearty appetites. He winced, in spite of himself, as he saw her draw back quickly when a brawny arm reached across her bosom in a lunge toward the butter dish. Then Ole Skaalheim, mistaking the salad dressing for gravy, poured most of it over his potatoes. Finally someone made a too graphic comment on the day's accident, and Corinne covered her eyes. It was the last time she sat at the table with the men.

An evening or two later, Roddy returned from visiting the Healy boy to find Corinne impatiently awaiting him.

"I thought you'd never get back," she complained as soon as he entered the house.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

"The Richters called up this afternoon and I promised we'd be over tonight. It's their last party before they go back to town."

Roddy tossed his hat aside and flung himself into a chair. "I'm not going," he said bluntly.

"Not going?"

"Corrie," Roddy said in a voice that was slow with weariness, "I've been out to parties till I'm ready to drop. I'm fed up with it. How do you expect a man to do his work and go out to some damn-fool party four or five times a week?"

For a moment there was silence. Then Corinne said, "But I promised them we'd be there."

"I can't help it," Roddy protested. "If you want to go, take the car and run over for an hour or so. I'm so doggone tired I could—"

"Harry and his sister will come for me—if you won't take me," Corinne replied distantly.

"Corrie!" Her name, as he uttered it, was a vehement plea. But she did not answer. She had already left the room and gone into the hall to telephone.

Roddy sat for a minute where he was and listened to Corinne's voice as she talked to Harry Richter and made her own elaborate excuses for her husband. Then he got up and went to the kitchen.

"Give me a bite to eat, Paula," he begged. "I'm sorry I couldn't get back in time for supper."

Paula smiled expansively. "I have it here—keeping it warm," she replied. "I'll bring it in."

"Don't bother," Roddy said and drew a chair to the kitchen table. "I'll eat it here."

He was sitting there a half hour later when Corinne came and stood in the kitchen doorway. She was dressed for the party. Roddy looked up and flicked the ash from his cigarette.

“Give my regards to Harry,” he said, “and tell him to bring you home early.”

Corinne frowned. “I didn’t think you *could* be so stubborn.”

Roddy got up and put his arm about her. “It isn’t stubbornness, dear,” he said quietly. “Lord, can’t you tell when a man is dog-tired?”

“You’re not too tired to go, if you really wanted to,” she persisted. “It’s just that you don’t like the people who are going to be there.”

“Well—they’re not my idea of a steady diet, exactly,” he admitted.

She drew her lips tight as she returned his look. “You are very funny sometimes,” she said coldly. “I simply can’t understand you.”

“Don’t try, kid,” he said and patted her on the shoulder. “Go ahead and have a good time. I’ll put in a couple of hours checking up on that new corn.”

“You’re not too tired for that,” she retorted.

“But that *has* to be done,” he told her. “There’s Harry now.”

There was the sound of a car coming to a stop before the door. Corinne turned away immediately and was gone. Roddy went to the window and watched until the car was out of sight.



CHAPTER TEN

SILVER gathered her tweed jacket about her and seated herself beside a clump of Juneberry bushes on the hill. It was quite late, but she had been unable to go to bed on such a night as this. The elder Willards and Steve had retired hours ago, but Jason and Paula were still talking together on the back porch of the big house.

From the hilltop the world was magical. A thin mist had risen over the swamp and pastures to the east, and on the loose, drifting islands of it the moonlight lay in a white dream. The unobscured, dark fields in the south and north seemed even more firm and real, bordered by the fog. On the crest of the hill the young birches were like splinters of fragile light, and luminous paint seemed to drip from the tiny palettes of the crisp poplar leaves.

It did not seem possible, here, that Gerald Lucas could be only a few miles away. She found herself wondering, idly, what he would do to amuse himself presently with the leisure his new enterprise would give him. His effort to restore their relationship would not be repeated, she knew. He had not made any attempt to communicate with her during the past several days, and so far as Silver knew, Corinne had not met him again. But that moment in the sultry moon-rise, when Corinne and Gerald had looked at each other for the first time, remained in her mind still, haunting and ominous.

The Willards had been almost painfully discreet about Gerald's visit to the farm. Jason and old Roderick had not spoken of him at all. Silver had at once dispelled Sophronia's brusque anxiety, and after that her aunt had not again referred to Gerald Lucas. Of Roddy and Corinne, Silver had seen almost nothing since that evening.

There was a sound now of someone moving out of the brush to the left. Silver glanced up and saw Roddy standing a few feet away, looking down at her.

"Why—Roddy!" she exclaimed. "I thought you and Corinne had gone to the party."

For a moment he hesitated. "Corinne went," he told her. "The Richters came for her." He sat down near by. "I took a night off and spent it bringing some of my records up to date."

"I wish," said Silver wistfully, "that I had studied plant pathology and those things instead of languages. Every time I go into your laboratory I feel so darned inferior!"

He laughed indulgently.

"Well, you're certainly young enough to learn," he remarked, "if you're still bent on being a farmer. And it's beginning to look as though you are." He got his pipe from his overall pocket, packed and lighted it. "Except that you ought to be in bed at this hour if you intend to be a *real* farmer."

"What about yourself?" she retorted.

"Oh—me! They laugh at me around these parts, you know. I'm not the real thing. They even go so far as to call me 'the professor'! They can't understand why I should be interested in biochemistry, and that stuff. In fact, I believe some of the reactionaries even think I'm wicked in not being satisfied with the corn the Lord put here to start with!"

"I suppose those people must have thought my mother was irreligious to call our big tree *Ygdrasil*."

Roddy grinned contemptuously and bit on his pipe stem.

"I doubt if any of them knew what it meant. But seriously, you ought to be in bed. You worked pretty hard today, Phronie told me."

"This is lots better than sleeping," Silver said, and waved her hand toward the clouds of mist that were drifting low under the waning moon.

"And not such a waste of time," he declared. "When I saw you walking up here just as I was leaving the shop—I thought I'd sneak along and get an eyeful of it for myself."

They sat for a moment in silence watching the thin wraiths blending, parting, blending, in the hollows below. Away to the south burned the red torches of flaming straw piles.

"You were over to see the Healy boy today, weren't you?" Silver asked finally.

"Yes. Jimmie was asking about you. You made a hit with that kid."

"That's something," Silver replied drily. "I was thinking about him today. Couldn't we give a barn dance or something and collect enough money to pay Doctor Woodward? The Micheners told me the Healys haven't a dollar to spare for anything like this."

“That’s an idea, Silver,” Roddy exclaimed with enthusiasm. “I’ve been wondering what we could do to help out. Old Doc Woodward won’t be so hard to satisfy. I can probably fix that myself. But the family is up against it, and without the boy’s wages, they’ll be in a bad way. I’ll speak to Corrie about it. I’m sure she’ll take to the idea.”

“It would be fun,” Silver said. And perhaps wretched for herself, she thought with a pang. Except for the Flatthes, a Norwegian family on the south, and the Micheners, frugal but free-spirited Germans up near the lake, she had so far made friends of none of the people in and around Heron River.

Roddy turned and looked at her suddenly. “You know—that’s the kind of thing that makes you likeable, Silver.”

“What kind of thing?”

“You’re always thinking about somebody else. The other day in the field, when you tore off your blouse—”

She was smiling at him. “I shall probably grow up to be a nice old maid—loved for my good deeds.”

“You might do worse,” Roddy said gravely.

“That—from a young man who has been married only a few weeks?” Silver laughed.

He pretended to scowl down at her. “Your conversation is far beyond your years, young lady,” he rebuked. “If you didn’t look nineteen, I’d swear you were—well, at least twenty!”

Silver tossed her head and looked at him with narrowed eyes. “Peasants always mature early,” she said grandly.

Roddy laughed and put his arm about her shoulder.

“You’re a great little kid!” he exclaimed. “After old lady Folds, and then—this bird Lucas cropping up—or I should say flying in—”

“Now, Roddy, please don’t start applauding me, or I may cry. Besides—I’ll be twenty in November, so I haven’t so much credit coming to me.”

“You will? Well, well! And I suppose Phil Michener thinks you’re just about the right age to settle down, eh?”

“Oh, I don’t know about that,” Silver replied loftily. “I like his sister, and I like him. They are real people, Roddy. They more than make up for—women like Mrs. Folds.”

“And men like Gerald Lucas?” There was a curious note in Roddy’s voice, half gentle, half embarrassed, the banter gone out of it.

Silver clasped her hands together before her. “Yes,” she said. “Although Gerald isn’t an evil as Mrs. Folds is, Roddy. He is an evil for me, that’s all. Or he was, I should say. But you know by this time that I don’t run away from—from that sort of thing—any more.”

Roddy cleared his throat. “It isn’t exactly a break for you, though, to have this man turning up to spend the winter in the district, is it?”

“He won’t bother me. I know him. I told him it was all over, and he knew that I meant it.”

“You were in love with him, weren’t you?” he asked abruptly.

For fully a half minute, Silver gazed down upon the wavering shelves of mist.

“I went and stayed at his apartment,” she said tonelessly. “For a week or so—while dad was away. Perhaps I was in love with him. I don’t know. But now that I am here I know that it wasn’t the right kind of love. I must have known that even then, because I wouldn’t marry him. Gerald wanted to marry me. He was more decent than I was. He still is, in a way. He fascinated me, but I knew, all the time, underneath, that his life could never be mine. That’s all there is to it, Roddy.”

At first, Roddy continued to turn the bowl of his pipe about in his hand. Then, slowly, his eyes moved toward the girl beside him.

“Does Phronie know this?” he asked quietly.

“No. I have never told anyone but you. I—I didn’t even tell dad the—the whole truth.”

It seemed as though the world lay very still about them then for a while. Silver, having yielded to that stark and incomprehensible impulse to speak, felt the silence now pressing in upon her intolerably. But when Roddy’s dark face turned to her again, she saw dimly there neither censure nor pity, but a sort of contemplative amazement.

“I don’t know why I’ve told you this,” she went on broodingly. “But it seems to me the land has something to do with it. It has been like telling it to the land—starting over again, honestly. It’s hard to explain—”

“I’ve hardly deserved your confidence,” Roddy broke in with a short and ironic laugh. “My feelings toward you have been anything but generous, Silver.”

He got up and with his arms folded stood looking down upon the eerie pastures below, where the mist was slowly rising like some supernatural headland.

“I think I’ve understood them, though,” she replied thoughtfully.

“When you’ve worked a piece of land until you have your roots in it—” He stopped suddenly, and bent toward her with his hand outstretched. “This is just my clumsy way of apologizing to you for being a fool, Silver.”

She laid her hand in his and he drew her to her feet. Silver, meeting his eyes, experienced a frightening contraction of her throat. Roddy pressed his lips together and drew a deep breath, as though some profound unease had settled within him.

Together they walked down into the yard, and their simple good night was taken coolly into the silence.

Harry Richter and his sister Evelyn, Corinne reflected with a secret fillip of contempt, were still—and perhaps always would be, in spite of their advantages of money and travel—just a pair of noisy and slightly vulgar cubs. Their parties, in this spacious summer residence which Harry called his “sink of iniquity,” still swarmed with people who were rather infantile, Corinne thought now, and a trifle boring. But of course their father owned most of the town of Maynard, and the family mansion there was the pride of the district. Harry and Evelyn cheerily preferred this “little place on the lake” and even in winter frequently gave week-end parties here.

Corinne sat in a deep chair in the shadowed corner of the vast, sprawling room, and smiled across her cocktail glass at the antics of an impromptu orchestra grouped about the grand piano. A saxophone, a guitar, and a ukulele seemed at the moment to be on the brink of destruction. Only a month ago she had thought Harry’s crowd sophisticated, worldly. Now, as she gave a sidelong glance at the amused profile of Gerald Lucas, who stood beside her in an indolent, provocative attitude, smoking a cigarette, it seemed to her that Harry’s friends were a little pathetic, even rustic. Corinne was coolly excited by the realization that never before in her life had she met anyone so polished, so cynically debonair as Gerald Lucas.

When he glanced down at her suddenly, she swiftly resumed her tolerant smile toward the orchestra, and delicately sipped her cocktail. Anyone else, Corinne thought, would have had some banal comment to make on the music. But Gerald instinctively knew the value of silence. She felt, with merely the least thrill of danger, enclosed with him in their mutual understanding, their mutual aloof amusement.

A rubicund young grain broker from the city came from across the room with an enormous silver cocktail shaker in his hands.

“One more little drink on the house—for the prettiest little girl in the party!” he announced.

Corinne laughed—a caressing little laugh, down in her throat, which she had learned long ago was very effective—shook her head and stood up.

“Thanks, no,” she demurred. “I’m much too warm already. I think I’ll stroll out for a little air.”

She had not turned, even a little way, toward Gerald as she spoke, but a few minutes afterward, when she sauntered slowly among the moonlit trees above the shore, she was not surprised that he met her there. She had known that he would follow her.

They stood together for a little while, still in that piquant conspiracy of silence, and looked out upon the shining lake. On the far shore a mist was rising, and the black spires of the pines seemed strangely to grow out of it toward the moon.

“I must be very stupid,” Gerald said suddenly, in a puzzled voice. “Otherwise, I should be able to figure out just how you come to be living on a farm.”

Corinne laughed and felt her heart quicken. “It’s very simple,” she said. “I fell in love with a farmer—and married him.”

“Did you?” Gerald looked at her as though in surprise.

They laughed in unison. Everything seemed delightfully absurd. Gerald picked up her hand and bent her little finger inward toward the palm. But immediately, almost absently, he let it go.

“Have a cigarette?” he suggested, and offered her his onyx and gold case.

“Thanks.” He held the match for her. Corinne, seeing his shapely, well-kept fingers, thought suddenly of Roddy’s hands, large and powerful and bronzed. All at once she felt uncomfortable and vaguely ashamed.

“Shall we go back in?” she suggested lightly.

“If you wish,” Gerald agreed.

She led the way back among the trees.

“I think I shall ask Harry to drive me home,” she said as they mounted the steps to the porch.

“My own opinion, if I were asked for it,” Gerald said casually, “is that Harry has had too much to drink to drive anyone home safely.”

It was long past midnight when Silver, preparing for bed, heard a car enter the driveway. She heard a voice that was sharply familiar to her, although it was low and pleasantly modulated. She glanced from her

window. In the moonlight, the chromium trimmings of Gerald Lucas's car shone unmistakably.

“This is downright spying!” Silver said to herself, and buried her face in her pillows.

But a sudden fright took possession of her. Corinne—and Gerald Lucas! Such a thing could never be. It simply *could* not!



CHAPTER ELEVEN

OUTSIDE the old stone house, the huge oak became a true monarch in crimson and gold. The brushwood on the hill flaunted its colors of death, so much gayer than any flag of life it ever flew. On the horizon, here and there, and in the sudden hollows of the land, clumps of common trees became balefires in their last gorgeous hour of the year.

Silver and Sophronia, in Roddy's car, were on their way to Maynard with two bushels of tomatoes and a basketful of yellow string beans they had gathered that day in the garden. The harvest dance was but a week away now, and there were things to be bought and cooking to be done and the old barn to be decorated for the event.

"I suppose if we get a dollar for this truck we ought to be thankful," Sophronia said. "Upon my soul, it's enough to discourage anyone—if it wasn't for the satisfaction of seein' the things grow."

Silver thought of the unseasonably hot afternoon of the day before, when she and Sophronia had harvested the vegetables they were now taking to Maynard in the hope of getting a better price there than in Heron River. The sun yesterday had beat like fiery lances down upon their backs. And now, in return for that discomfort, they would receive a dollar, if they were lucky.

"And with Roddy talkin' of storin' his grain," Sophronia went on, "it doesn't look like an easy winter for any of us."

"It's hard to understand," Silver said, "with so many people going hungry—and farmers talking of using their grain for fuel."

"It's past me," Sophronia admitted. "I wouldn't be surprised if Roddy gave up the whole business one of these days and moved to the city. Though there wouldn't be much sense in that, either. I thought he'd feel better the other day when he got first prize for his corn at the fair. But it didn't change him any so far as I could make out."

Silver had sat and listened, her hands clasped before her, gazing straight ahead at the winding highway. There was something she wanted to say, but the words seemed too clumsy, too unutterably crude. These people had

become her people—the thought forming in her mind flowed on in a radiance—the gloamy and faraway radiance of the legend of Ruth.

All at once she felt a tide of warmth move up over her throat and face.

“I wanted to say something last night—when Roddy was talking to you and Jason about things,” she said. “But—I didn’t know just how to put it.”

“What was that?” Sophronia asked.

“It’s just that I feel I have a right to help—and I want to. I have a little money left—plenty to do me for a year or even more—and I don’t need the rent Roddy is paying for that east section. I don’t see why I—”

“Land sakes, child!” Sophronia interrupted. “Don’t ever mention such a thing to Roddy. He’d take your head off. I’m glad you didn’t say anything about it last night. No—he’ll get along and pay his way—or he’ll make a change of some kind. He already thinks you’re doing far more than enough to pay your board, if it comes to that!”

Silver was silent for a long time. It was just as she had expected. Roddy’s pride would never permit him to take any assistance she might have to offer him.

When they reached an open stretch between the two towns they caught a glimpse of the lone figure of a man skulking across the fallow field. He carried a shotgun in the crook of his elbow, and there was something mean and shabby and predatory in his manner—and yet picturesque, too, Silver thought.

“Well, I’ll be!” Sophronia exclaimed, narrowing her eyes. “If that ain’t Duke Melbank back again! Huntin’ rabbits—same as usual. Wonder if Roddy knows he’s turned up again.”

A twinge of uneasiness, of embarrassment, passed through Silver.

“Roddy wouldn’t bother with him now, would he, Phronie?” she asked haltingly. “Surely, he must realize—”

“He ought to know Duke ain’t quite all there,” Sophronia interrupted. “But Roddy has an almighty temper—and he don’t forget quick. When he likes anybody, he doesn’t stop to think. And he likes you, Silver. Which is something, when you recollect how he’s felt for years about that land of yours.”

In Maynard, while Sophronia bargained with the owner of an independent market, Silver went down the street to make some purchases of her own. She was not unaware of the curious looks that were cast toward her as she hurried along. Women walking side by side in the street nudged each other and then looked brightly in at display windows. In the store where she

bought material for a woollen dress and a pair of warm blankets for her bed in the old stone house, the saleswoman waited on her with a sort of uneasy awe. “They apparently think I’m not quite human,” Silver thought bleakly.

She was about to leave the store when a too familiar voice hailed her from another counter. In a moment she was beside Gerald Lucas.

“Hullo, darling!” he greeted her softly and gave her his hand. “Where have you been keeping yourself? I’ve been hoping I might run across you accidentally somewhere—since you refused to let me call on you—but no such luck!”

Silver regarded him with a deliberate smile. “I’ve been working from sun-up to sunset,” she laughed.

“Good thing the days are getting shorter,” Gerald retorted. “Though it doesn’t seem to be doing you any harm. You’re looking great.” He leaned toward her and lowered his voice. “Haven’t I been a good boy—not coming around to bother you?”

“Very good—or very busy,” Silver said.

“Just very good, darling. Are you still determined to become a farmer?”

Gravely, Silver looked at him. “I’ve never been happy before in my life,” she replied.

Gerald smiled at her. “Well—I suppose I ought to go somewhere and shoot myself just to prove that my heart is broken.”

“You’ll never do anything like that,” she observed.

He pressed her arm affectionately. “The truth is, Silver, I’m glad you’re happy. I’ve known all along you were too good for me. We’d never make a go of it. You’re a very serious young lady. But that’s no reason why you shouldn’t drop around and see my new place when we get going.”

“I might.”

“Come over for the grand opening. We’re going to make an event of it. Having a hunt-meet, no less.”

“You don’t mean—a fox-hunt?” Silver laughed.

“No, my sweet. Ducks—geese—deer. They can shoot rabbits if they want to. I have a chef who can do miracles with a wild duck or a haunch of venison. You might come up for the dinner and the dance afterwards. Give a little swank to the affair.”

“I can’t promise—but I’ll see,” Silver replied.

“Your little friend, Corinne, is coming. I’ve already dated her up.”

“You’ve seen her?” she asked obliquely.

Gerald laughed. “Seen her? I hope to tell you! I drove her home from the Richter party the other night.”

She regarded him soberly. “I don’t think you should have done that,” she said.

He gave her an injured look. “Are you accusing me, darling? Why shouldn’t I have brought the girl home? Her friends were completely blotto by that time.”

Silver smiled tolerantly. “I know you, Jerry. And I know Corinne pretty well by now. I also know Roddy Willard.”

“I haven’t met the young husband yet—but that little girl is a cute trick. Am I right?”

“This isn’t Chicago, Jerry,” she reminded him.

“I knew there was something funny about the way I felt out here,” he teased her. “Maybe that’s it. But I don’t see what that has to do with your little girl friend.”

“You do,” Silver retorted. “The less she sees of you, I think, the better.”

He looked down at her, smiling, perplexed. “My God, Silver, I never thought you’d go native in a couple of months!” He swung around suddenly to the tall, mettlesome lady who stood behind the counter. “Say, sweetheart,” he murmured, “do you know what the centipede said when he won the dance marathon?”

“I do not,” the lady replied primly. “Is there anything I can do for you?”

Gerald grinned. “Don’t rush me,” he begged. “I have a weak heart. See those mocha gloves down there?” He pointed with a finger pressed against the glass. “I want a pair.”

“What size, please?”

“Oh, go-sh, how should I know?”

Blushing, the saleswoman measured Gerald’s hand. “Seven and a half,” she announced, and dropped the tape to the floor. Reddening, she turned to a shelf and found the gloves, then stood and watched Gerald try one of them on.

“Fits like a glove, sister!” he observed and gave her the money.

While the woman went to get the change, Silver and Gerald laughed together—softly so that they would not be heard and add offense to the embarrassment the woman already felt.

“You are quite heartless, Gerald,” Silver murmured, a little ashamed of herself.

“Aw—it’s all in fun!” Gerald said. “I bet she likes it, at that. I think I’ll invite her to the big party out at the club.”

“She might accept,” Silver warned him. “Oh—there’s Sophronia! I’ve got to run.”

With a wave of her hand she hurried away to catch up with Sophronia, whom she had seen across the street.

Sophronia and Silver, with the car windows up, drove home through dissolving distances of rain. Gray and soft as a dream, as a sleep, was the closing horizon and the glistening stubble of near-by fields.

At the wood-road intersection, on their own land, they saw Corinne in her white linen riding habit taking hasty leave of some of her friends who were also on horseback. Corinne was mounted on Roddy’s favorite colt, the jet-black Nestor, and in that purple-gray twilight she looked beautiful, Silver thought. But Sophronia drove grimly on.

“Think of gettin’ only ninety cents for all our work yesterday,” Phronie mused aloud, “not countin’ the cost of seed and the bother of plantin’. Darn it! I could almost wish every city swell might starve to death!”



CHAPTER TWELVE

THE mow of the new barn was full of hay, so that it could not be used for the harvest dance. Consequently, the loft of the old barn below the hill, which had latterly been used for surplus storage, came into its own again.

Silver and Paula had gone to considerable trouble to string the gray and crumbling beams with bright cobs of corn, with small, yellow pumpkins and squash, with wine-colored sumac, and oak leaves that might have been flakes from the sun. The lanterns, hung at intervals, dripped crêpe paper streamers of orange and green.

By midnight, it looked as if the whole countryside had turned out to the dance, as well as many from Heron River and Maynard. An improvised orchestra—an accordion, a fiddle, a harmonica, a horn, and a snare drum—made an irresistible music that seemed to come out of an unspoiled and wistful past. There might come a time, Silver thought, when nowhere in the world could one hear this simple, wild, untutored music that quickened one's pulses and set one's feet to flying over the waxed, knotty floor. There might—but it would be a sad time. . . .

Jason stood with Silver at one end of the loft, where the orchestra was getting ready to play for another square dance.

"I think I'll ask Paula for this one," Jason said.

"If someone isn't ahead of you," Silver said. "She seems to be very popular tonight."

Jason was silent for a moment. "Have you ever noticed," he said presently, "what an awfully pretty neck and head she has?"

"Paula is a handsome girl," Silver observed.

"Her face isn't much, but she has nice hair," Jason added. "I've seen pictures where the hair was like that—the color of good wheat just before it's cut."

"Paula would make a fine model for some painter," Silver ventured, but Jason hurried away as old Steve, acting master of ceremonies, called for the

next dance.

Silver moved down to where Roddy and Corinne were standing together, Roddy dressed in corduroy trousers and a white shirt open at the throat, Corinne looking her sweetest in a winged organdy gown of peach color, with blue satin sash.

"I wonder what has happened to Gerald Lucas," Corinne said as Silver joined them. "I sent him a special invitation urging him to come, and here it's midnight—"

"He probably wouldn't be amused by this," Roddy remarked.

"He would have brought his own crowd and they could have had a lot of fun," Corinne argued. "Perhaps some of the rest of us might have enjoyed it too."

Silver smiled. "He may be staying away on my account, Corinne. I told him once that I didn't want him to come here. He probably took me at my word."

Corinne made no effort to conceal her amazement. "You told him that?"

"Silver may have her own reasons for not wanting him around," Roddy put in.

"I have," Silver said lightly.

"Well—as I have said before—it's no affair of mine, after all," Corinne observed pointedly. "But I *do* think—when I take the trouble to invite someone specially—"

"Forget it, Corrie," Roddy interrupted. "There goes the next dance."

He led her out upon the floor as Phil, the eldest of the Michener boys, came for Silver.

"You promised to dance this one with me," Phil said with a bow.

"I haven't forgotten it," Silver smiled.

As they moved together into the dance, neither of them noticed Duke Melbank and a companion stagger up from the top rung of the loft ladder and make their way into the crowd. Uppermost in Silver's mind was the thought that she was being received by the country people here as if she were one of them.

Old Steve called out in his high thin voice: "All join hands!"

Silver and Phil drew apart and reached out on either side to take their places in the circle that was forming.

"Ladies to the left and gents to the right!"

Silver left Phil and joined the girls who moved in a gay circle past the men.

“All swing!” old Steve shouted suddenly.

In the laughter and confusion, Silver was at first too bewildered to do anything more than gasp for breath in the smothering embrace that held her. It was a moment or two before she recognized the face of the man who had whirled her into his arms. Then she saw that it was Duke Melbank. She struggled to free herself, only to be clutched closer to his swaying body. She was aware now that he was thoroughly drunk. For a brief moment she felt that she was going to faint, and glanced wildly about for Roddy or Jason.

“Let’s get acquainted, Cutie!” Duke Melbank muttered thickly against her cheek. “I’ve liked you ever since I saw you that night in Chi.”

“Let me go!” Silver breathed fiercely.

“Aw—can’t you give a guy a break?” he persisted.

Silver turned her head in a frantic effort to make some sign to Roddy, but he was at the other end of the floor. The ardent embrace in which she was held and the dense, alcoholic reek of the man was making her sick with revulsion.

“Let me go!” she demanded again, and struggled to break away from him.

“Aw, come on,” Duke burred in a cajoling voice as he swung her bodily into a dim corner formed by a pile of feed sacks that towered almost to the rafters. “Be a sport, kid!”

It had all happened so quickly that probably no one on the crowded floor had taken any notice of it. Silver succeeded in freeing one arm to throw all her strength into the blow she struck across his grinning face. Duke recoiled for an instant, but kept his hand clenched about her wrist.

“You got fire, eh?” he chortled. “I like that in a girl. You and me—”

“Roddy!” Silver gasped, flinging herself about just as Roddy Willard appeared, alone, around the corner of the pile of sacks.

Duke dropped Silver’s wrist as though it had scorched him. “Haw-haw! Can’t Silver and me have a little privacy without—”

“Get out of here, Duke,” Roddy interrupted quietly. “And go out quietly or I’ll have to throw you out.”

“Say, listen,” Duke began menacingly, “I paid—”

Roddy whipped a dollar bill from his pocket and thrust it into Duke’s hand. “That’s for you and the guy that came in with you. Now—get out!”

With a malevolent glare at Roddy, Duke started to shamble away. “You can’t get away with this, Willard,” he muttered. “And you don’t need to think I don’t know what I’m doing.”

He grinned insinuatingly at Silver and Roddy stepped quickly toward him. Duke drew back, shuffled his way along the edge of the crowd, called to his companion, and made his unsteady way down the ladder through the square opening in the loft floor.

Luckily for the festive air of the occasion, Silver reflected, there had been only one or two witnesses to the unpleasant scene.

Roddy looked down at her. “Shall we dance, Silver?” he asked. “I think it would be best—considering everything.”

Her eyes half closed, she nodded, and Roddy drew her into his arms.

A fierce, impersonal sort of tenderness toward her came over him as he led her into the dance. She seemed to be without substance—like smoke, or like the blue-gray mist over a meadow just before dawn. And suddenly he felt as though he had taken on the nature of the earth itself, stolid and old and patiently revolving, and yet poignantly aware of Silver as an aura that clung to his rugged body. Under the ancient beams of the barn loft, even the closely moving throng of dancers seemed to become immaterial in the rhythm of the old waltz which flowed over the dimness like a bouquet out of the past.

Silver did not speak. This tumult enclosed by her passive body, she thought in desperation, had begun at the very instant when Roddy—a very matter-of-fact knight, indeed—had rescued her from the loathsome attentions of Duke Melbank. Now, as she moved with Roddy through the waltz, her very breath seemed to tremble as it passed her lips. Horror lest he should discover what she knew now for a certainty—that she loved him as she had never loved anyone before—ran through her veins like ice.

When after an agonizing eternity the intermission came, she stepped back from him and looked up with a dazed smile. But a glimmering veil seemed to hover between them, so that she could not really see him.

“I’m going to the house,” she told him, her voice running headlong, plunging, she thought, into disaster. “If Phronie asks for me—tell her I have a headache—I want to be alone.”

Roddy, with a troubled frown, put out his hand to take her arm, but Silver moved hurriedly away.

A few minutes later, behind the closed door of her own room, she sat down in the darkness and stared out at the crisp autumn tracery of the leaves

of the great oak against the stars. She felt merely numb now, as though from some stunning blow.

“To think—when the real thing came,” she whispered dully to the square pattern of stars and leaves, “it had to be wrong too!”



CHAPTER THIRTEEN

FLAMY OCTOBER ebbed into the past, and presently the hill behind the stone house on gray days began to reveal its honest, sullen thorniness. Roddy and Jason and old Steve did the fall ploughing under heavy skies. The first frost came, and the stars grew brittle and coldly separate in green night spaces.

The district buzzed with talk of the opening of the Emerald Bay Club for the winter season. It was welcomed by the townspeople especially, who saw in the enterprise a stimulus to local business. The fashionable folk who would come out from the cities for week-ends at the Club would be free with their money and the tradesmen would benefit. If this fellow Lucas could only conduct his affairs in a way that would keep everything well within the limits of the law . . .

The Hunt Dinner and Ball celebrated the close of the big-game season in the north. Roddy attended with Corinne, whose radiance filled him with pride and a secret, shamed alarm. Silver sent her regards to Gerald, and spent the evening playing cribbage with old Roderick, winning so handily that the old man peered at her once or twice with amused suspicion.

The following day was lusterless, soft and fleecy, threatening rain. At twilight, with a pent-up feeling she could no longer endure, Silver saddled Rusty and rode into Heron River to get the evening mail. In the post office she met Freda Michener.

“We missed you last night—at the Club,” Freda said, “and Phil, especially. I don’t think he would have gone if he’d known you weren’t going to be there.”

“Have a good time?” Silver asked absently.

“Hasn’t Corinne told you? It was gorgeous!”

“I haven’t seen Corinne yet. I think she has been sleeping in today. They didn’t get home till dawn.”

Freda dropped her voice to an embarrassed whisper. “Roddy Willard had better watch his step. I saw Corinne—well, she was only out walking under

the trees with Gerald Lucas—but you know how people talk around here. I don't think anyone else saw them, but they were out a long time, and you know—moonlight and everything!” She giggled roguishly. “I know what it would do to me!”

Silver laughed nervously. “Nonsense, Freda!” she protested. “Forget about it—and keep it to yourself, *please*. City people don't think anything of such things.”

With the one letter for Roddy which Tillie Fink thrust out to her through the wicket, Silver rode slowly home. At one moment she would wildly contemplate going to Gerald and telling him what she thought, or perhaps to Corinne. But in the next her heart would sicken at the futility of such a course. Gerald, she knew, would only laugh at her, as he laughed at everything grave, and Corinne would probably fly into a temper.

At home again, she unsaddled Rusty and turned him into his stall. Then she went reluctantly to the big house to give Roddy his letter. She had contrived to see as little as possible of Roddy since the night of the harvest dance. Now this wretched fear for Corinne would simply double her discomfort in the presence of Roddy and his wife.

She entered the house with taut nerves. Corinne called to her from the living room in a voice that seemed to Silver to be portentously vivified and gay.

“You missed a swell time last night, my dear!” Corinne cried as Silver stepped into the room. “I didn't get up until two this afternoon! Isn't that scandalous?”

Roddy looked up a bit wearily from the desk where he was making notes in his ledger. He lifted his hand toward her in greeting.

“It must have been fun,” Silver said hurriedly. “Here's a letter for you, Roddy.”

He got up and took the letter, then glanced at it with a quizzical frown and tore it open. Corinne at once sprang up and stood at his shoulder, her eyes upon the unfolded letter.

“Sit down a minute, Silver,” Corinne said parenthetically. Then she uttered a squeal of joy. “Roddy! A position at the University Farm! Darling!”

Roddy glanced down again, not without pleasure, at the letter. His patient experimenting with yellow corn . . . his working under difficulties . . . his devotion to an idea . . . the position would be open by January first . . .

Silver, staring at him, felt her brain spin and turn over and then come to a cold, clear pause. “Have you been offered a position, Roddy?” she asked in a voice as calm as she could make it.

“At the University, Silver!” Corinne burst out. “Oh, it’s—I can scarcely believe it!”

She seized a cigarette and lit it with a flourish.

“Don’t get yourself all worked up, Corrie,” Roddy begged. “Old Neal Anthony has been trying to lure me into something like this ever since I left college. It seems hard to convince him that I’m a farmer, not a white-collar man.”

“What do you mean?” Corinne pouted, then gave him a winsome smile. “Don’t tease me, darling. I’m so happy I could cry.”

Roddy sat down and gazed at her with distracted eyes. “You wouldn’t want me to take on a tenderfoot’s job with a—”

“Roddy!” Corinne interrupted. “You’re simply cruel to talk like that, even in fun.”

He shrugged his shoulders and turned to his desk. “I’m not trying to be funny,” he said. “I thought you knew me better than that.”

Corinne looked suddenly dumfounded. “You don’t mean—you aren’t going to turn it down, are you?” she gasped.

“I’ve turned Neal Anthony down before,” Roddy replied quietly. “I see no reason why I should change my mind now.”

Silver felt that she had frozen into her chair. It was only with a supreme effort that she got up and fled from the room, Corinne’s voice following her, piercing and furious with outrage at Roddy; Corinne’s voice—hounding her out into the darkness and down the hill to the old house.

For two hours after supper, Roddy sat with his father and Sophronia and Jason in the kitchen of the stone house while they discussed Anthony’s offer. Jason was quick to sympathize with Roddy’s contempt for a job where he would become a mere hireling at the beck and call of others, though he was forced to recognize the narrowly calculated means by which the family would have to manage throughout the winter.

“I could take the place over, Rod,” he said slowly. “With just the rest of us here—we wouldn’t need so much. We’ll get enough for the corn and the small grain to pay expenses—maybe. Perhaps we ought to sell those six heifers, instead of—”

“Of course,” Roddy interrupted patiently, “I know you could swing it, Jase. But the point is that *I* want to be in on it.”

Old Roderick was cautious as he was kindly.

“After we marry, my boy,” he remarked thoughtfully, “we travel in pairs. You must remember that.”

His son, with tightened lips, rose and struck a match, then relighted his pipe.

“I’ve thought rings around that, dad,” he said tersely. “But I always come around to the fact that down in Iowa they are having farmers’ strikes and picketings and bloodshed. I’m one of those guys, dad. My wife has to be one of those guys too. If we were in that territory we’d be in the mess—we wouldn’t be protected by a fancy job.”

It was Sophronia who came out boldly with her opinion that Corinne would never take to life on the farm and the sooner Roddy realized that the better.

“I feel sorry for the poor girl,” Phronie declared vehemently. “Imagine her coming here with chiffon underclothes and a Pomeranian dog! It ain’t fair—and I say it now, though I admit I was kind o’ hard on her at first. She married you because you were good-looking and smart, Roddy, and she liked you. But she saw you had something more to you than just slavin’ day and night for a living! It’s up to you, Roddy—”

“Yes,” Roddy said crisply. “It’s up to me. I’m damned glad it is. Corinne will know that she married *me*. Not an idea she had about me.”

“Well, that may be,” his father reminded him. “But one bad year is enough to put a blight on a marriage, my boy, as well as on a crop.”

“There’s always another year!” Roddy retorted with a short laugh.

In the end, Roddy found himself battling alone against all three members of his family. Silver had taken no part in the discussion. She had sat aloof in the chimney corner, a book in her hands, and had not read one word of the printed pages she turned with nervous fingers. As she listened to their talk, however, a conviction grew within her. Roddy Willard *must* accept the position that had been offered him. There was, as he had said, always another year for the farmer, but that had nothing to do with the problem.

She could have thrown her arms about him and wept for him. She knew—as the others knew, indeed—what was in his heart when he had said that. But she knew what none of them knew. Had she not heard Freda Michener talk that afternoon in the post office? Had she not seen enough herself, even if she had not spoken to Freda?

At last Jason got up and left, Sophronia banked the fire, and old Roderick went off to bed.

“Well, I’ll see you all tomorrow,” Roddy said heavily and started for the door.

“Wait a minute, Roddy,” Silver called out, and the sound of her voice seemed to quake in her breast.

He turned and looked at her curiously.

Sophonria yawned. “I’m going to bed,” she said. “And you’d better drink a glass of milk before you come up, Silver. You’ve been lookin’ peaked lately.”

“What’s on *your* mind?” Roddy asked Silver, as soon as Sophronia had gone. His tone was unwontedly brusque, although his dark smile took some of the harshness out of it.

Silver laughed up at him with disarming naïveté as she stood before him with her hands pressed down back of her upon the edge of the kitchen table.

“I thought I’d just wait until everybody else got through talking,” she said. Her glance fell for an instant from his. Then, summoning all her fortitude, she spoke. “You’ve got to take this position, Roddy.”

He looked down at her with a puzzled frown, one eyebrow raised comically. Then he threw back his head and laughed with genuine amusement.

“You’re getting back at me, eh? I once told you to get out—and now you’re giving me the air.”

“That has nothing to do with it. You are a fool to stay on here—starvation staring you in the face—with a respectable living offered you.”

“My dear child!” Roddy exclaimed. “You look almost motherly just now. You want me to take the job—for my own good, eh?”

Words, hot and honest, sprang to Silver’s lips, but she was able to check them in time. “That’s part of it,” she admitted lightly. “But—I agree with Phronie. Corinne hates the farm.”

Roddy thrust his hands into his pockets and looked at her patiently. “Corinne will be all right when she gets to understand it a little better.”

Suddenly, Silver’s body stiffened. “There’s something more too,” she said, her chin rising coolly, indifferently. “When your lease is up next summer, I’m going to sell my section.”

She saw him blink for a moment as though he had not heard aright. Then he took a step toward her. “I don’t believe you,” he said. “What has changed

your mind about this place all of a sudden? There's something else back of this."

"There isn't!" she burst out passionately. "For God's sake, get out before—before you're ruined!"

Her words seemed to be scurrying over each other now, she thought in panic. But he should not wring the truth from her—he should not!

Roddy's voice came in a hoarse whisper from his clenched teeth. "You too! My God, I thought you had more fight in you than that." He turned away from her and moved toward the door, then looked back quickly. "All right—go ahead! I might have known what to expect when I began dealing with a woman. Well—sell it tomorrow if you want to. But I'm going to stay until I'm kicked off."

"You are being a fool!" she told him, staring to keep back the hot tears. "What will that bring you?"

"It won't bring me the kind of treachery you've handed me, by God!" he barked, and plunged out into the darkness slamming the door behind him.



CHAPTER FOURTEEN

RODDY, with Corinne beside him in the car, had got well out upon the highway toward Ballantyne before Corinne spoke a word.

“I suppose Sophronia was hurt because we had to go to mother’s for Thanksgiving dinner,” she said finally. “She was awfully nice about it when I spoke to her, but it’s always so hard to tell what she’s thinking.”

“I don’t think she minded so much,” Roddy said patiently. “Phronie is very understanding. We might have waited until tomorrow morning to leave—we could have made it easily in time for dinner. Though I suppose that doesn’t matter.”

Corinne drew herself upright beside him. “I don’t see what difference that would make. Oh, Lord!” she exclaimed with irritation. “Do I have to draw a diagram to explain how much I wanted to get away—if only for a couple of days?”

“Not for me, at any rate, and I haven’t heard anyone else asking for it.” He was silent for a moment. “Do you really hate the place so much?” he asked without looking at her.

She did not reply. He turned and glanced at her.

“Well?” he prompted.

“Why go over it all again?” she replied. “The last week has been just about too much. With everyone going around in a state of nerves—ever since the night you and Silver quarreled—it’s enough to drive a person crazy. I don’t see how you can be so stupid as to hang on when we have a chance to get out.”

Roddy drove doggedly on, making no reply, and Corinne, giving him a frantic sideways glance, continued with mounting warmth. “If Silver sells to a speculator next summer—and she will—where will we be? There isn’t even any sense in your doing any work on the land next spring, is there? What if the new owner—oh, I don’t know, but it all seems so absolutely

crazy to me! What will you do if you don't take Anthony's offer? You've never told me that."

While she waited for his reply, Corinne thought with bewilderment of Silver's sudden decision. She had not expected an ally in Silver Grenoble, of all people. Another thing smote brilliantly, arrestingly, across her mind. Corinne would rather be with Roddy in a comfortable existence somewhere than to fall in love with Gerald Lucas. She admitted to herself that she was practical. The line of least resistance, anywhere, would give her more creature joy than the line of struggle. But life on a farm . . .

"I'm not sure," Roddy said at last, "what I shall do. I think you might leave that with me. At any rate, I'm not going to let Silver Grenoble tell me where I'm getting off."

Corinne, baffled beyond words, could only fall back upon the fact that Roddy had until the first of January to accept the position Anthony had offered him. There would be more than a month yet in which to reason with him calmly. So far, she had succeeded in merely antagonizing him. She realized now that she had gone about it all in a clumsy fashion. Roddy Willard was not to be bludgeoned into changing his mind. She would have to employ other methods—to wheedle, cajole, use strategy. Well, she was beginning to understand this husband of hers.

In Ballantyne, Mrs. Meader welcomed her daughter with tearful joy, and even bestowed upon Roddy a pecking kiss, as an afterthought. Heavy, drab and vague, old Edwin Meader shook hands with Roddy and accepted his daughter's embrace with something like confusion and embarrassment. As upon their earlier meeting, Roddy was wrung with pity for this broken old man who was still fighting to restore himself to a position of self-respect in his community.

Roddy had anticipated that Mrs. Meader's deft and irritating artillery would be trained upon him the moment she learned from Corinne of Neal Anthony's offer. He was not disappointed. The bombardment began immediately after dinner, when he sat with the family in the chintz-upholstered living room. Corinne sat, for the most part, with demurely folded hands, and permitted her mother to wage the battle with Roddy alone. Old Edwin smoked his cigar and listened, but took no part in the discussion.

Mrs. Meader, not unlike a plump robin perched on the edge of her fat, frilled chair, seemed to teeter toward Roddy with each emotional heaving of her breast.

"But, Roddy, dear," she cried plaintively, "think of my little girl! She married you—because she had faith in you. She always said you were made

for something more than working your life out on a farm. She is ambitious for you.”

“Roddy doesn’t think so,” Corinne murmured self-effacingly.

Roddy looked across at Edwin Meader, but the old man sat with his hands together, as if he were unaware of anyone else in the room.

“I don’t think you’re quite fair to me in that, Corrie,” he said evenly. “We happen to have different opinions on what my ambition ought to be, that’s all.”

“All right, dear,” Corinne said and was silent.

Mrs. Meader leaned forward in her chair and smiled engagingly. “Of course—when two people are married—even happily married—they must expect differences of opinion. Edwin and I used to disagree over the silliest things. Didn’t we, dear?” Edwin showed no signs of having heard the question, other than to shift uneasily in his chair. “But we must learn to agree on what is best, of course—regardless of our personal opinion,” Mrs. Meader added.

Roddy fought down his rising choler. “It isn’t always easy to agree on what is best,” he observed dully.

“On the contrary,” Mrs. Meader countered, “it should be very easy, as soon as one discovers it.”

Roddy smiled. “Of course,” he admitted, “when you know—”

Mrs. Meader teetered toward him. “But when everyone around you—everyone who matters—the people who really love you—try to tell you, don’t you think their opinions might be worth something? After all, you seem to be alone in your opinion—and you *might* be wrong, my dear.”

For a moment, it seemed to Roddy that the world would have been a better place to live in if all the Mrs. Meaders had been strangled at birth.

“That’s quite possible,” he said, with another glance at the taciturn old Edwin.

“Well—I suppose you must settle it between yourselves,” Mrs. Meader concluded, flicking her skirt lightly with her finger tips. “We all have our own problems. Of course, I have said nothing about my little girl’s wishes. I have done my best to be quite impartial. But I might be expected to know something about what Corrie wants in life. She has been raised in an atmosphere—”

“Oh, mother!” Corinne protested. “Won’t you please leave me out of it?”

Mrs. Meader got up from her chair. “As you wish, my dear, of course. I have talked far too much anyhow—on something that is none of my

business. Besides, it's time we were all in bed."

Relieved as he was that the discussion had come to an end, Roddy found no satisfaction in seeing Corinne's mother retire with a feeling that she had been offended. He got up and went to her.

"But it is your affair," he said. "After all, I married your daughter. And I want you to know that I respect your opinions and shall think over everything you have said."

He was a bit insincere in that, he reflected, but there seemed to be a place in life for gentle insincerity.

Mrs. Meader laid a soft hand upon his arm and leaned against his shoulder. "Thank you, Roddy, dear," she said, luxuriating a little in her own self-pity. "You are more like a son to me."

"I think I'll step out for a little air," Roddy said, as Corinne and her mother prepared to go upstairs.

When Roddy came quietly indoors a few minutes later, he saw the light still burning in Edwin Meader's study. With a feeling of pity for the old man, he stepped lightly to the door and looked in. Edwin Meader was sprawled in his big chair beside his table, his chin upon his chest, the smoke rising in a thin line from his cigar.

"Good night, Mr. Meader," Roddy said. "I think I'll turn in."

The old man lifted his head slowly and looked at Roddy. For a moment it seemed that he was not going to speak. Then he drew himself up in his chair and beckoned with his cigar.

"Come in, come in," he invited. "You have the whole night to sleep."

Roddy stepped into the study. "I'm in no hurry, sir," he said.

Edwin Meader pointed his cigar toward the door. "Close it behind you."

When the door was closed, the old man motioned to a chair and opened a drawer in his desk. Without a word, he produced a decanter and two small glasses which he filled. He pushed one of them across the table toward Roddy, then took the other in his fingers and sat back in his chair.

"Willard," he said with a brightness Roddy had thought impossible in anyone so diffident, "you have never talked five minutes with me. Do you realize that?"

"It's true, Mr. Meader," Roddy admitted. "I—"

"Don't you regard that as rather singular in a man who has married my daughter?" the old man demanded.

“It is, sir. I don’t seem to have had an opportunity to talk to you much.”

“Don’t misunderstand me, Willard. I didn’t ask you in here to find fault with you.” He paused and eyed Roddy narrowly. “Take your drink,” he said abruptly and emptied his own glass.

“Thank you,” Roddy said as he followed the old man’s example and set his glass aside.

“The fact is, Willard,” Edwin Meader went on, “I’ve never had a chance to say more than half a dozen words to you. And that’s singular, too, eh?”

“You’ve been very busy—” Roddy began.

“Don’t be a fool, Willard!” the old man interrupted. “We don’t like competition when we talk, that’s the point. The women thrive on it.”

Roddy laughed. “Perhaps, Mr. Meader. I don’t know that I’ve given much thought to it.”

Edwin Meader smoked in silence for a moment. Finally he lifted his eyes to Roddy. “Willard,” he said, “I am not the man I used to be. You know that. My business is ruined. My health is gone. I am living under a roof that is not my own. The house that shelters me—the bed I sleep in—the very food I eat—everything belongs to the woman I married. This place”—he made a deprecating gesture with his hand—“was hers when I married her. I suppose I ought to be grateful for it. I am. There is no telling how long we shall be able to remain in it. It has taken a good part of my income to maintain it—and now there is nothing left. But there’s something I want to tell you, young fellow. I am not taking all the blame to myself for what has happened to the world during the past two or three years. But I’m ready to take my share of it. I put my money into enterprises that were doomed from the beginning because they didn’t have their roots in the ground. Air-castles—pipe-dreams! We all did it. And now we’re paying through the nose for it. It’s too late for some of us to start over again. But it isn’t too late for some of us to pass on a little advice to those who are to come along after us and clean up the mess.”

He paused and got up from his chair. Quietly he went to the door and opened it. He thrust his head out and looked about the outer room, then drew back and closed the door softly. When he spoke again, his voice was low and intense.

“I have taken the trouble to look into your affairs, Willard,” he said. “I did it when I knew you were going to marry my daughter. I know your case—all about it. And I have listened to what has been said tonight—at dinner and in the room out there. And I’m telling you now—before it is too late—*don’t* be a traitor to the land! Don’t go back on the only thing this country

has today—the only thing that’s worth a damn! You know where your heart lies. You know what you have to be grateful for. Don’t let any woman—or any gang of women—stampede you into doing what you don’t want to do. Bring your children up where they’ll have a chance to be sane—and keep them there as long as you have anything to say about it.”

He turned and went back to his chair.

“That’s what I wanted to tell you, Willard,” he concluded. “Will you have another drink?”

“I think not, thanks,” Roddy replied.

“Well—go to bed then. But think over what I’ve told you, young fellow. It’s going to be hard sledding for a couple of years. If you ever get stuck—let me know. I may not be able to help out myself, but we’ll find a way out of it. If there isn’t a way out—if the farmers are going to go to the wall—then we might as well kick the whole country into the ash heap and forget it ever existed. Now—get to bed!”

Roddy left his chair slowly and started toward the door. He wanted to tell Edwin Meader just what those few minutes in his study had meant to him, but it seemed futile to try. He halted before the table.

“I wish I could tell you, Mr. Meader—” he began, but the old man waved his hand in dismissal.

“I don’t want to hear it,” he said. “Good night, young fellow!”

Roddy hesitated for a moment, then thrust his hand over the table.

“Then—good night, sir,” Roddy replied. “I’ll see you in the morning.”

The old man got up and took the extended hand, a weary smile lighting his pale eyes.

It was not until late the next day, it seemed to Roddy, that he felt the full force of what Edwin Meader had told him. He became aware of its effect upon him when Corinne, in the presence of her mother, referred once more to Neal Anthony’s offer.

“Don’t you think we’ve said enough about that for the present, Corinne?” he suggested.

Corinne gave him a strange look and turned away without making any reply. But when, a few hours later, Roddy mentioned the drive home, he knew that she had not forgotten the rebuke.

“I have decided to stay with mother for a few days,” she said coolly. “You ought to have a little time to think things over by yourself, anyhow.”

And late that night, Roddy returned home alone.



CHAPTER FIFTEEN

ON THANKSGIVING DAY the first snow fell in Heron River. For hours before a single flake was seen, a soft, blue-gray pall hung about the stone house, clinging closer and closer, until at last it lay tangible as deep velvet against the window panes.

Jason and Paula and Steve had come down to the old house for turkey dinner in the early afternoon. After the feast, Silver dressed warmly and set out alone for a walk across the fields to the Flathe place. Slag-colored clouds bellied down over the livid pastures, almost within arm's reach, it seemed, and before she was half an hour on her way the snow began to fall. The air darkening, the newly ploughed black fields became almost violet as though a fine ash were settling down upon them. Flocks of crows foraged in the harsh stubble; cattle, horses and sheep still grazed patiently on the lonely, half-frozen meadows.

The brooding melancholy of the day filled Silver with a sweet, aching nostalgia, a yearning too profound to name. To run away from Roddy Willard would mean that she would run away from these fields—from her very birthright. And there would never be any real escape in such a flight, as there had been in her flight from Gerald Lucas. Gerald had not been real, anyway; the hard ground beneath her feet seemed to tell her that now.

She had been too selfishly absorbed during the past few days to give any thought to what Sophronia might feel about her going away. Poor old Phronie—how little she knew of what was going on about her. The more she thought of it, the more convinced Silver became that Roddy Willard would remain on this land until he was forced to leave it. Her threat to sell the land had done nothing except to make him more stubborn in his determination to remain. Something more, perhaps—it had sharpened his antagonism toward her. As Silver's eyes fell upon the mysterious horizon, she was made desolate by the knowledge that he was as passionately devoted to this land as she was herself.

Now the Flathe homestead lay before her, dimmed and cosy under the purple-white bloom of the flurried air. As she came nearer, a lamp was lighted in the little farmhouse, and its warm eye twinkled a welcome to her and brought a full, rich sensation to her throat. No, she thought vehemently, tears dimming her eyes now, not for any unhappy, outrageous love of Roddy Willard would she give up her life here!

The Flathe children greeted her with their usual uproarious good humor. These Norwegian youngsters lived in a merry cosmos of their own where even poverty was something to laugh at. Six of them there were, ranging from seven years of age to nineteen, with enough boisterous enthusiasm to turn the little farmhouse into a babel. Silver played the decrepit little organ, from which two keys had long since disappeared, and sang with the children until the gathering darkness warned her that it was time to leave. But Mrs. Flathe, with her habitual insistence, spread the table with the white hardanger-work cloth and served coffee and *fattig-mand* and *lefsa*. Silver ate heartily of the quaint fare, though she never quite lost the trance-like mood that had descended upon her during her walk through the fields in the falling snow.

On the way home, she came upon Jason and Paula beside a thicket of hazelnut bushes. The snow was sinking down upon the bushes like great white weary moths. Paula looked at Silver without surprise or embarrassment, and Jason's dark eyes smiled at her.

Paula drew down a branch of the bursting, feathery hazelnut clusters. "They are always best when they stay on till the first snow," she said as she stripped the nuts from the bush.

"We'll come down and get them tomorrow," Jason suggested. "It's time we were getting back to the house now."

The three began their walk home together. They saw the lights glimmering in the stone house before they passed the swamp where the tattered cat-tails were wearing jaunty little caps of snow. The reeds keeled over dolorously, dim brush strokes in the gloom, and wherever a snowflake fell upon the dark water a mark was made, softer and more significant than rain.

When they came before the big house, Jason paused. "Come along in, Silver," he invited. "I have something to show you. I wouldn't have the nerve to ask you—but we have the house all to ourselves. It's all right with you, isn't it, Paula?"

"Sure," Paula said shyly.

"Why—what's the mystery, Jase?" Silver asked.

He colored bashfully as a boy. “Well—I’ve been making a picture of Paula,” he confessed. “And I thought maybe you’d like to look at it.”

“It’s much prettier than me,” Paula said modestly.

“Oh—why, Jase—I’d love to see it!” Silver replied eagerly, going toward the door.

They entered the house and Jason led the way to the attic and lighted the lamp. In the “studio,” on a birchwood easel that stood directly beneath the small, square skylight from which the day had faded now, reclined a florid but far from unrecognizable portrait of Paula Gobel. The powerful and intimidating Valkyrie limned there might easily have been a Teutonic ancestress of Paula’s.

Silver knew that Jason was waiting for her to say something, but an emotional tightening in her breast made it almost impossible. For some time she had suspected that there was more between Jason and Paula than they were willing to reveal to their little world. Whatever ultimate expression it achieved mattered not at all. It was there and they shared it.

“Jason—I’m amazed!” she burst forth at last. “Why—it’s really—really great!”

“Gosh!” Jason sighed with relief. “I was scared to show it to you. I thought maybe I’d worked it over too much. You see—on this side—it was hard to get Paula’s hair just right—in the shadow there. But do you think it’s good enough to give to Phronie for a Christmas present? That was my idea. She likes pictures, you know.”

“She’ll love it, Jase!” Silver assured him. “I know she will. But why don’t you ask me to sit for you some time?”

Jason smiled a bit sheepishly. “I’m not so good as all that. You’ve got—I don’t know what it is.” He shrugged apologetically. “Well—you’re not as pretty as Corinne, for instance. But there’s something about your face—I don’t know—but it would take a real artist to catch it. I’d like to give you one of my new pictures, though, if you want one.”

“I’d love to have one, Jase,” she said slowly. “I’d be very proud of it.”

Jason went self-consciously to a shelf and drew down a portfolio of drawings. “Nobody but Paula has ever seen these,” he said. “When Roddy bought those pictures to hang in the sitting room, I thought he might have saved his money—but I wouldn’t have showed him these for anything. Roddy got kind of queer when he went to college.”

The drawings were pastoral scenes with a simplicity of line and tone that surprised Silver. “Why, Jase, they are lovely!” she exclaimed. She turned to him impulsively. “Would you rather do this than farm?”

He laughed and shook his head, then looked at Paula. “I guess not,” he said quietly. “I’m a farmer. But it’s because I like farming that I get a kick out of doing this once in a while. No—I’ve read enough about guys starving to death in the cities—trying to make a living out of painting. Which one do you want, Silver?”

After a moment’s thought, Silver selected a light autumn sketch in grays and browns, a glimpse of the swamp at the eastern end of the pasture just before dawn.

“Has Roddy never seen this?” she asked.

“No—he hasn’t seen any of them. I used to show him some of my things—and he liked them. But after he met Corinne—well, it’s none of my business. I never could quite figure it out, myself. Damn it—I feel sorry for Roddy!”

Silver tucked the drawing under her arm. “I’ll hang this one in my room,” she said, then started toward the door. “And don’t worry about Roddy. When a man falls in love, it does funny things to him sometimes.”

Jason laughed. “Gosh, doesn’t it?” he exclaimed, and looked at Paula. “Shall I tell Silver?” he asked suddenly.

“Sure!” Paula said at once.

Jason looked at Silver and smiled. “Paula and I are going to be married in the summer,” Jason confessed, “—maybe in the spring. We’re thinking of a little dairy farm up north—maybe—we’re not sure yet.”

Silver exclaimed with delight. “Am I the first to hear about it?”

“We didn’t know ourselves—not until this afternoon,” Jason grinned.

Tears came into Silver’s eyes as she looked at them. Jason and Paula—beginning life together on a dairy farm . . .

“I’m not in the least surprised,” she laughed. “But I don’t know what to say.”

“Don’t say anything,” Jason replied, putting his arm about Paula. “But don’t tell the others just yet.”

“Well, I suppose I ought to wish you luck,” Silver said, “but when two people are in love, there’s nothing much anyone can say. Isn’t that so, Paula?”

“It sure iss so,” Paula agreed, lapsing into an accent she had almost conquered since her advent from the Rhineland ten years ago.

The days passed, and Silver Grenoble came presently to know what it meant to live on a farm in winter. There was the endless hauling in of wood and coal, the endless lugging out of ashes. There was the weekly washing and hanging out of clothes on an icy, swinging line, and carrying them in again in twilights unutterably bleak; the shirts and underwear and sheets, frozen stiff into unequivocal shapes, assumed ludicrous personalities, and the smell of the rigid, frosty articles brought into the warm kitchen was something Silver would never forget. The smell was raw and clean and cosy.

The weekly round of work fell into a rhythm which somehow eased the discomfort, and in the old stone house there was always an overtone of contentment. For old Roderick had lived in a sod hut in his youth, and Sophronia could recall years of drought or rust when her people had subsisted on potatoes and fish speared through the ice of the lakes for weeks at a time.

In Roddy alone, it seemed, was there any discontent. When, the day after Thanksgiving, it was discovered that he had come back from Ballantyne without Corinne, nothing was thought of it. He had explained that Mrs. Meader had not been well and that Corinne would stay with her for a few days. But when the middle of December approached and Corinne was still with her mother, Sophronia became rather voluble on the subject of Roddy's living alone in the big house. For Roddy had withdrawn more and more to himself. He rarely put in an appearance at the old house, unless it was to discuss some matter of business with his father, or in response to an urgent invitation from Sophronia to come and take dinner with them. His days he spent in work about the place. And at night, when Jason and Paula would come down to play Rummy or Hearts in front of the fireplace, Roddy would shut himself in his "shop" sorting and grading and completing his records, so as to be ready for another season of experimenting with his beloved corn.

Roddy's mood was rarely discussed by the others, but Silver knew that beneath their silence lay an intensity of feeling that one day must break the bonds of reticence that held it. She knew, too, that while Corinne's absence had something to do with the way Roddy felt, behind it all was the growing resentment toward herself that had begun that night when she had told him of her intention to sell her land as soon as his lease had expired. That had rankled until he could think of nothing else. She knew that from the way in which he avoided meeting her, and from his curt manner toward her on those rare occasions when a meeting could not be averted. She knew, too, that the family was aware of it. That, undoubtedly, accounted for much of their restraint.

With Silver, it soon became an acute misery. She had come here seeking peace and had gradually become the center of a situation that was growing more intolerable every day. She tried to talk about it with Sophronia, but it had come to nothing. How could she hope for more when it was impossible to reveal to Sophronia all that had prompted her to act as she had done? She thought of going to Gerald Lucas, but again she knew that Gerald would only laugh at her.

In the middle of December, two porkers were despatched to Brade Haskin's, near Heron River, for butchering. Silver had fed those pigs on buttermilk and bran mash and had grown to love their tight, blue-black bodies, their cheerful, fluted ears, their small, skeptical eyes, and the hearty philosophy of their snouts. When, a few days later, it came to rendering the lard, she was so depressed that Sophronia, recalling her own young days on the farm, sent her out for a walk while she did the work herself.

It was a black, blustery night, and it would be wild on top of the hill, Silver thought as she put on her old leather jacket and her close-fitting tweed hat. She went out into the inky darkness and started toward the summit of the hill, when a sudden flare of light, like the striking of a match, arrested her attention through the small window of Roddy's workshop in the shelter of the slope.

Roddy must be in there, she thought, getting ready for another night's work. The thought of his self-imposed loneliness smote drearily across Silver's heart. Why should she not go to him now and talk to him—beg him not to remain away from his father's house because of her?

She started toward the low building under the slope. Before the doorway, she looked up and saw that the door was open, but there was no light within. Wondering, vaguely alarmed, she stepped to the threshold and paused.

“Roddy!” she called softly.

Immediately there was a noisy scuffling from within, and a rush, in the absolute blackness, of some great bulk toward her. Before she could make any outcry, she was hurled violently to one side, only a thorny gooseberry bush checking her fall to the ground.

For a moment she was helpless with fright as the hurrying figure disappeared into the darkness. Then, screaming Roddy's name, she ran up the slope toward the big house. The wind seemed to blow her backward as though in an insane, diabolical dream. Where were the lights of the house? Only the kitchen would be lighted, of course, and she could not see that from the hillside. Hearing nothing but the wind, seeing nothing but

engulfing night, her sobbing cries choked back into her throat, she ran straight into Roddy's arms.

For an instant she clung to him involuntarily, scarcely aware of what she did, and shaking from head to foot. Then, recovering herself, she sprang back from him and struggled to speak.

"Silver—Silver!" It was Roddy's voice calling her back to her senses. "What the devil has happened?"

"Quick, Roddy—hurry down—" she stammered. "Your shop—somebody was in there just now when—"

Mechanically and in grim silence, Roddy stalked down to the sheltered coign of the hill. Silver hurried along at his side, desperately trying to regain her self-control.

Without a word, Roddy lit the small lamp that stood on a shelf just inside the doorway. The dim light revealed immediately the destruction wrought by a vandal hand. The sample jars of seed on the rough oak table had all been smashed, the yellow and white kernels strewn from one end of the room to the other. The floor was littered with torn paper. Seed sacks had been ripped open with a sharp knife and their contents scattered.

"What the deuce!" Roddy exclaimed as he stood in the middle of the floor and glanced about him.

Silver, her teeth chattering, seated herself on a bench.

"Tell me what happened," Roddy said curtly.

He glanced down at her and saw that her fingers were pressed tightly against her lips as though they had frozen there. He stared at her and suddenly felt himself suffused with an altogether disconcerting emotion.

Briefly she told him what had occurred.

Roddy drew a deep, angry breath. "What damned fool would pull a trick like this—and at this time of night? And what did he expect to get out of it? That's what gets me." He cleared his throat awkwardly and gave Silver a glance in which anxiety surmounted his hostility for once. "He didn't really hurt you, did he?"

Silver got to her feet. "No—of course not!" she replied stiffly. "I was just scared senseless. I hope—" She glanced vacantly about the room. "Oh, dear, I suppose you'll never be able to sort this mess out, will you?"

"Lord!" he said gloomily. "I'll get it sorted out, I suppose, but it will be some job. Weeks of work shot clean to the devil!"

"Perhaps I could help," Silver breathed, her voice taking on strength and swiftness now like a wing.

He looked at her, then bent and scooped up a handful of kernels from the floor and laid them on the table under the light.

“Thanks,” he said crisply. “If I find that I need any help—”

“Roddy!” Silver broke in boldly. “I thought it was you I saw lighting the match here tonight. That’s why I came.” She sat down again on the bench.

He continued to scoop up handfuls of the corn, bending down on one knee so that Silver saw only the back of his dark head and the ruddiness of his neck.

“Well?”

“I came over to beg you not to—not to stay away from our house because of me,” Silver said. “If that’s the reason—”

He stood up and looked at her. At the painful flush that sprang into her cheeks, he stepped toward her with contrite haste. His feelings were in such confusion now that he could scarcely speak.

“I’m sorry, Silver,” he said heavily. “It’s certainly no time for me to hold out against you—after this. We don’t seem to understand each other, that’s all.”

Silver turned her eyes away from him. “I can’t go on like this,” she said. “It has been utter misery.”

“I can’t say I’ve been enjoying it myself.” He looked down at her and saw that she was shivering. “But listen—you’d better get back into the house,” he remarked gruffly. “I’ll try to clean this place up a little.” He reached down and drew her to her feet, then took her hand in the most acute embarrassment he had ever known. “Let’s forget it, Silver.”

For a moment she permitted her hand to rest in his, then withdrew it hurriedly. Without a word she ran to the door and vanished in the darkness toward the stone house.

Later, when Roddy thoughtfully returned home, the strong wind beating up the slope against him seemed fantastically like that sudden impact of Silver’s cold, slender body as she had come screaming into his arms.

“Good Lord!” he muttered, and ran his hand across his eyes. “I must be crazy.”

But as he lay in bed thinking over the events of the night, it was the memory of Silver Grenoble’s clinging to him that gnawed and worried at the core of his being. That memory, singularly, brought him no sense of guilt, but rather vexation and annoyance—as though he had come suddenly upon a puzzle in his own soul which he must solve. The more he concentrated upon it, however, the more the puzzle spread and twisted, until at last as he stared

up toward the invisible ceiling, his whole life seemed to be tangled in a hopeless maze.

He doubled his pillow into a hard lump beneath his head and vowed savagely that tomorrow he would do two things—he would write a letter to Neal Anthony definitely rejecting his offer, and in the evening he would drive to Ballantyne and fetch Corinne home.



CHAPTER SIXTEEN

BENEATH the cobalt glitter of the sky the snow-covered branches of the firs looked like shelves of platinum. It was a metallic night, Roddy thought, honest and hard and beautiful. In contemplating it, he found himself driving along presently at a snail's pace, although he had forty miles yet to go—and fifty miles back home again, with Corinne beside him.

Corinne had been acquiescent enough when he had telephoned her today. The cynical thought had crossed his mind during his conversation with her that she was bored with her mother's complaining and that even a return to the dull life of the farm was preferable to a continued endurance of that. She had deliberately prolonged her visit with her mother, as Roddy knew, in the hope that he might finally accept Neal Anthony's offer, if only to please her. She had carefully avoided any mention of it, either in her letters or in their talks over the telephone. She had been affection itself, indeed, and always spoke regretfully of her prolonged absence. But Roddy had had time to do a little thinking about Corinne. He had not forgotten his talk with old Edwin Meader. With a father like that, Corinne could not be utterly shallow. She was young and spoiled and wholly untrained in responsibility. But she would grow up in time, Roddy reflected, and the passing months would bring to her a sense of her place in the scheme of things. He had been a little unwise, perhaps, in encouraging her to amuse herself as she wished about the countryside. But he had wanted her to be as happy as possible. He suspected too that his own vanity had been behind that. He had never wanted her to become the drudge that poor old Sophronia had been all her life.

But there would have to be a change. For days now the decision had been smarting in his mind. For one thing, Corinne must be brought to realize that they would have to economize at every turn during the coming year. He had been wondering of late how they would manage to keep Paula, but Jason had confessed that he was planning to take care of Paula himself in the spring.

Well, he reflected, things had moved along since Corinne had left home. There would be much to tell her. He had not mentioned, in their talk over the telephone today, the mysterious attack upon his laboratory last night. After discussing it with his father and Jason, Roddy was convinced that the visitor had been none other than Duke Melbank. Duke probably harbored a grudge against him since that night of the harvest dance. There was not sufficient evidence to bring a charge against the fellow, but Duke, having had his malicious little satisfaction, would probably not disturb the Willards again.

He thought again of Silver Grenoble and the fright she had suffered last night. For that matter, she had not been far from his thoughts all day. Within some strange region of his being she had dwelt like a shimmering ghost. But a ghost she was, he swore violently; an obsession from which he could, and would, rid himself.

These woods always gave him a sense of personal detachment. This was a sober, even a harsh, world that cut a clean line of demarcation between folly and wisdom. And presently he saw that no matter how he explained it, his flare-up of emotion toward Silver Grenoble was simply folly, born of his own resentment and loneliness in Corinne's absence.

Thereupon, strangely enough, his thoughts of Corinne grew warm and impatient, and he longed to have her back home with him again, where they could begin once more on a firmer, more honest foundation of common life.

It was two o'clock in the morning when Roddy returned to the farm with Corinne. Somewhere along the road—perhaps five miles out of Ballantyne—she had broached the subject of Neal Anthony. When he told her of the letter he had written that day, Corinne had lapsed into a silence more deadly than any vitriolic denunciation he might have anticipated.

In the house, Corinne carefully removed her hat, coat and gloves. Then she sank down on the couch in the living room and gazed blankly before her.

Roddy came over to her. He drew a chair, seated himself, and took her hands into his own. When she turned her head away and refused to meet his eyes, he raised a hand and drew her face slowly toward him.

“Look at me, Corrie!” he begged softly.

When her cool and unwilling gaze met his a strange qualm flashed over him. Her eyes seemed frozen, masked, horribly alien.

“Let's not begin like this,” he pleaded. “You don't know what it means to have you home again. And you can't guess how lonely it has been here without you.”

She sighed and leaned back against the couch. Then she looked at him. “I wonder,” she said slowly.

He smiled. "You don't have to wonder, dear," he told her and patted her hand affectionately. "I've wanted you every minute of every day and night. Isn't that enough?"

"It's so easy to sentimentalize," she retorted.

"And pleasant, too," he reminded her. "Gosh, can't a man be a little sentimental with his own wife after—"

"There's more to living than—"

"Listen, Corrie," he interrupted, "I know there's more to it than sentiment. It's a tough job, however you look at it. But we can make it easier if we tackle it together. I'm sorry about that job Neal Anthony threw my way. I wish I could have taken it—for your sake, Corrie. But—I couldn't. And some day you're going to be glad I didn't."

Corinne sighed again. "I'd rather not discuss it any more," she said coldly. "You've made your decision."

She drew her hands away from him and Roddy sat back in his chair. For a moment he regarded her thoughtfully. During the past few days a hope had formed in his mind that he must express to her—a profound and solemn hope on which, he believed, depended the security of their life together.

"All right, Corrie," he said at last. "We'll drop it—and start in again. But let us start in right this time. Let us face our problems together and work them out together. I want a home—a home with you, Corrie, where we can bring up our children and be happy together." He blundered on, hearing himself as though he, somehow, were groping in that cold fog of Corinne's eyes. "I've been thinking about that very thing while you've been away. If we had a baby, you'd find something to live for here. You'd feel more content. You'd feel more sympathetic to the land, maybe—and to the growing things about you. . . . We'd be closer to each other in every way, Corrie—"

She sprang up suddenly. "Have you gone crazy?" she cried huskily. "Do you want me to bring a child into a place like this—where we may be starving next year? Or wasn't it enough for you to throw Anthony's offer into my face? You had to think up something more brutal—"

"Corinne—for God's sake!" Roddy stammered in despair. He reached toward her impulsively, but she shrank away from him and his hands fell to his sides. A tardy shame flooded him now as the full realization of her utter failure to understand his suggestion came upon him. "We are not going to starve," he went on lamely, obstinately. "Lots of people are bringing up children on less than we have."

It dawned on him painfully that Corinne was not listening. He felt completely lost, floundering about in a gray and chilling chaos. He thrust his hands down into his pockets as he became aware that he was actually shivering.

“All right, Corinne,” he concluded dully, “I did not know that I was insulting you. I’ll not do it again.”

He got to his feet and turned to find her eyes upon him, widening for a moment with reflective indolence, then closing as though she were shutting him out of her consciousness, shutting herself in with her own resignation and defeat. Months later, when Roddy thought back, he perceived that the change in Corinne had occurred at that moment, as definitely as the fall of a leaf from a tree.

On an evening in February, old Roderick sat dozing beside the fire; Sophronia was mending underwear and Silver was shaping herself a jaunty little hat out of a piece of blue velvet she had picked from a trunkful of odds and ends which Phronie kept upstairs.

Paula had come down from the big house and sat beside the table munching an apple. Whenever anything ruffled her placid serenity, Silver had observed, Paula always looked for something to eat.

Sophronia pushed her glasses back into place on the bridge of her nose and shook her head.

“There’s no use in you gettin’ yourself worked up into a state over Corinne,” she said to Paula. “If you ask me—all that woman needs is exercise.”

“Doctor Woodward says she ought to walk in the fresh air a little every —” Paula began, but Phronie interrupted.

“Walk, my eye! If she’d do a bit of her own housework, it’d be better for her than all the walkin’ she could do in a year.”

“I don’t know,” Paula ventured. “She doesn’t seem right. She took one of them headaches again today—just after Roddy left for Maynard. Sometimes she scares me. She stares at the walls and says the wind is drivin’ her crazy. She said tonight she could see the walls swayin’. I don’t know—I’m beginnin’ to see things myself—”

“Isn’t Roddy back from town yet?” old Roderick asked suddenly.

“He phoned about an hour ago and said he wouldn’t get back until after ten,” Paula told him. “When I told Corinne that, she told me to get out—and

then she laid down again and began to moan about her head killin' her. I don't like it."

"What's Jason doin'?" Phronie asked.

"Ach, he's workin' on his picture. He told me to get out, too," she laughed, "and so I come down and left the two of them."

"Well, it's beyond me!" Phronie sighed. "She seems to be healthy enough when there's doin's over at that club, or some shindig in town. There's something wrong somewhere—and I hate to think what it is."

The tapping of old Roderick's pipe against the wall of the fireplace and the crackling of the tamarack branches relieved the painful silence that fell upon the group.

"You're talking too much, Phronie," old Roderick said quietly. "Whatever is wrong will come right somehow. I've sometimes thought Roddy did wrong in bringing the girl here in the first place. She's not a farm girl. But it doesn't do any good to sit around talking about it."

It seemed abruptly to Silver that she could no longer endure the conversation. She got up and put her work aside.

"I think I'll go up and stay with Corinne for a while," she said.

"That's better," old Roderick said. "It's the first time anybody here has been in Roddy's house in almost a week."

"And whose fault is it!" Sophronia remarked as she fitted a patch to the seat of a pair of fleece-lined drawers.

"It doesn't matter much," old Roderick replied. "We can be neighborly, no matter what we think."

Silver felt the rebuke in the old man's words. Almost a fortnight had passed since she herself had been in Roddy's house. How easy it had been just to call a greeting across the yard from the barn or the chicken-house, if Roddy or Corinne happened to be anywhere in sight! The intense cold had been reason enough for staying indoors most of the time.

Paula put on her mackinaw jacket. "I think I'll go along with you," she said hesitatingly.

"Let's go then," Silver said.

Corinne was huddled up in bed weeping stormily. At once Silver drew the comforter away from her face and seated herself beside her.

"Corinne!" she said sharply. "You ought to be ashamed of yourself!"

Corinne stared at her with wild eyes. "Who sent you here?" she demanded petulantly. "I suppose the whole Willard family has been having a conclave!"

“Stop it!” Silver broke in. “No one sent me—and you’re acting like a child.”

Corinne began to weep in earnest. “I—I might have known—you’d say that. This place is driving me mad! The wind—and the cold—and being alone—”

“You don’t have to be alone,” Silver protested. “Why didn’t you come down with Paula tonight and—”

“Because they all hate me! I know it. They hate me because I’m not a farm lout—like the rest of them.”

Silver regarded her with a mingling of distaste and pity. “Nobody hates you, you little fool!” she said impatiently.

“They do! Roddy hates me—and loves to see me suffer! He’s tickled to death because Jason has humiliated me. Paula for a sister-in-law—oh!”

Silver took her by the shoulders. “I’m not going to sit here and listen to that nonsense,” she said severely. “You’ve got to get yourself out of this mood. Turn over here! Is your head aching?”

“It has been bursting—all day!”

Silver ran her fingers gently over Corinne’s shoulders. “I used to do this for my father when he had a headache,” she said quietly, and began pressing her finger tips into the tendons and muscles that were knotted at the back of Corinne’s neck. “It always made him feel better—and often cured his headache. An old doctor we knew once in Mexico showed me how to do it.”

Corinne turned over on her face and moaned. But Silver continued to ply her fingers until Corinne began to relax at last, and her muffled wailing ceased.

“Lie just as flat as you possibly can,” she ordered. “Pretend you’re dead.”

“I don’t have to pretend,” Corinne moaned.

Silver laughed. “That’s better!” she said.

“O-oh—that hurts!”

Silver worked more gently. “Wasn’t that a gorgeous ice storm we had this morning! The hill looked like one huge diamond.”

“I don’t know. It scares me to death even to look out of the window these days.”

“Don’t be silly! You ought to get out and see what the world is like around you. It’s perfectly grand these mornings. I’ll tell you—take a walk with me early tomorrow morning, over to the Flathe place and back. You have no idea how good it makes you feel.”

A sort of docility had crept over Corinne. "I'll do anything," she mumbled, "just to get away from the grayness of this hill."

Silver thought it best to say nothing in reply to that. For some time there was silence between them, until Silver began to wonder if Corinne had fallen asleep. Dad Jim used to drop off to sleep under the soothing touch of her fingers. Presently, however, Corinne spoke up unexpectedly, her face still pressed against the pillow.

"Why didn't you marry Gerald Lucas, Silver, when you had the chance?"

Startled, Silver involuntarily lifted her hands. Then she began stroking Corinne's temples.

"I should have been the most unhappy creature in the world," she replied.

"Why?"

"Because—I've seen enough of that life to know," Silver said.

Corinne lay still and did not speak. Fear filled Silver's heart as she fixed her eyes upon Corinne and wondered, with something like despair, what was passing in the mind of this girl who was Roddy Willard's wife. Once or twice she felt that she must say something to warn her against Gerald Lucas and the bright disaster that awaited any woman who gave him her love. But the words would not come. At last, with an inner trembling, she got up and spoke softly.

"I hope you feel better."

Corinne turned over and yawned. "Lots better. Thanks so much, Silver."

She patted the coverlet on Corinne's shoulder. "Try to sleep now. And I'll come up in the morning, right after breakfast, to take you on our hike."

"Perhaps it would be better to postpone it till the afternoon—or maybe another day," Corinne suggested. "I'm expecting a telephone call tomorrow."

Silver regarded her for a moment in silence. "Well, go to sleep now, anyhow," she said, and stole quietly out of the room.

Alone again under the cold starlight, Silver found that her ministering to Roddy's wife had had a profound effect upon herself. All that lawless feeling for Roddy that had battled within her for weeks retreated now before a burning pity for Corinne and a feverish resolve to do everything in her power to save Roddy's wife from herself and her false sense of values.



CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

IN MARCH, after a prolonged spell of bitter cold and very little snow, a sudden thaw set in. It seemed to Silver, as she moved about the farm, that there was an audible crackling commotion in the hard gray earth and the gray trees, their trunks threaded and glistening with the thaw. The creek broke and swelled, the water and the ragged ice hurtling and crashing over the stones in splendid rage, and presently the thickened willow buds showed tiny slits of pearl.

Raw days followed after that, but although the bitter wind seemed to gnash its teeth about the rafters of the old house, and the prairie horizon appeared glassy and vacant, the back of the winter, as Sophronia said, was broken. Deep, soft rains came in April and the Willard men, their spring ploughing begun, met other farmers on their visits to town.

Everywhere the talk was of the gloomy outlook for the farmer. "A man doesn't know whether to pray for rain or drought. If there's a bumper crop, prices will go still lower—and if you don't plant at all, you get nothing."

Sven Erickson met Roddy in Fjelstad's Feed and Implement Store in Heron River.

"I hear you're goin' to dump your grain after all," he said, shifting uncomfortably from one foot to the other as he spoke.

Roddy favored his friend with a rueful grin. "I can't help myself, Sven," he said. "I should have taken your advice and sold last fall."

Sven laid a hand on Roddy's shoulder. "Don't you go to losin' your nerve, young feller," he said, "like a lot of dese odders round here, and sellin' your land. T'ings ain't goin' to be laik dis forever. De clock swings round—she always hass."

They moved together to the door and Sven, changing the subject, said, "Come over to my house vun night and ve play a little pinochle. I ain't seen you dere now for a year. And bring de little vife, too."

Roddy thanked him as he got into his car, then raised his hand in salute and drove away. The day, he thought, as he left the town behind him, was too transparent and wide and blue after yesterday's rain to tolerate such gloomy reflections as were his just now. What if he had to sell his last year's grain at practically no profit to himself! He was no worse off than countless farmers whose obligations were staggering compared with his own. He could still give Corinne enough money to buy herself some spring clothes, though she probably would never know how much it meant to him. Well, perhaps things would be better now that spring was here.

For that matter, things *were* better. Corinne had been more like her old self during the past weeks. He was well aware that Silver Grenoble had had much to do with the change in Corinne's state of mind. He had seen very little of Silver, but she and Corinne had become very friendly. He could not help smiling to himself now as he recalled the disconcerting emotion he had felt toward her on that wild night just before he had gone to Ballantyne to get Corinne. An age had passed since that night, it seemed.

Where the highway cut across his own land he slowed down as he saw a horse and rider come out from the wood-trail to enter the brush on the other side. It was Silver Grenoble.

"Where do you think you're going all by yourself?" he laughed.

"If you really must know," she replied, "I'm going down to get some dogwood near the lake."

"Where's Corinne? You two—"

"She wasn't home when I called. We hadn't planned anything for today."

"You look pretty swell in that red hat," he said, smiling up at her.

"It isn't a hat. It's a béret."

"It's still a hat to me," Roddy grinned. "Say, why don't you come up to the house some evening when I'm around. Gosh, I haven't seen anything of you since Christmas!"

"I've been busy," Silver retorted simply.

Roddy smiled. "Busy giving lessons in good cheer to my adorable wife, eh? Well, you've made a good job of it."

The sudden flags of color flew in Silver's cheeks, and Roddy suffered an acute pang of dismay.

"Run along and get your dogwood then," he said hurriedly, and started his car as Silver wheeled Rusty to the side of the road.

As he continued on his way, Roddy found that he could not dismiss from his mind that swift, baffling blush his sally had won from her. She had

looked so vibrant, so clear and fearless as she came out upon him there in the road. What a taut zest her slim body had, erect in the saddle! Her face, under the red béret, had had the delicate, flushed courage of a spring flower. She was not of the land in the same sense that Paula Gobel was. Paula was like a field of ripe wheat. But Silver Grenoble had an earthy quality all her own; she was like young grass in a pale spring sun, or sheet lightning in a summer dusk, or the shadow of a bird's wing over water. Roddy was glad that he could regard her so disinterestedly now, for her own fine values.

Silver rode idly through the woods toward the south shore of the lake, permitting her horse to pause now and then to crop the succulent young blades that were putting forth in splashes of sunlight between the birches and the cottonwoods and the elms. Here and there in a sheltered place, a snow-drop or blood-root blossom lifted its waxen purity against the gold green of tender underbrush, or there would be, overhead, a frantic, sudden whirl of wings to divert her attention. But neither these things nor all the quivering, blue air, freighted as it was with the sweetness of exploding tree-buds, could obliterate from her mind the glimpse she had had of Roddy Willard, leaning forward from his car and smiling at her in his impersonal, friendly way.

If he would only wear a hat when he was out of doors in this spring weather, so that she would not long to rumple his hair whenever she saw him! She could stand seeing him if she did not have to see his shaggy hair in the sun.

The ground began to decline toward the lake shore, where the dogwood was a flurry of white bloom. Silver gathered an armful of the snowy branches and got back into the saddle. She decided to cross through the woods toward Emerald Bay and come out upon one of the numerous trails that led to the clubhouse. It would be easier to do that, with her burden of dogwood, than to ride back through the brush the way she had come.

In a dappled enclosure of birches where new leaves were like a sunny green rain, Corinne Willard leaned against a tree, her head thrown back in the manner which, she knew, made the white curve of her throat beautiful. Gerald Lucas, one hand pressed against the tree trunk above her head, was looking down at her with a contemplative, a masterful smile, that thrilled and frightened her, and made her feel at the same time triumphant.

“Haven’t we been playing tag long enough, darling?” he asked softly. “Why don’t you admit that I love you?”

Corinne laughed throatily. “What a sweet new way you have of putting it, Jerry,” she said, and lifting her hand she ran her fingers through his hair.

Beyond her shoulders, at the top of a grassy crest where the trees opened, Gerald saw Silver Grenoble seated on her horse and staring at them with wide eyes.



CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

THE air became downy and tender, the sky drew away from the earth to its own infinite blue, and spring bloomed into May.

But for Silver Grenoble it was as though she were suspended in some nameless atmosphere and unable to feel the firm ground beneath her feet. Her waking hours, since the day she had seen Corinne and Gerald together, had been filled with an apprehensiveness and sense of impending disaster, and her dreams were confused and tortured with visions of Roddy.

Preparations for the wedding of Paula and Jason stressed rather than relieved her sense of loneliness. Here were two, at least, who were going forward with their lives unaware of the defeat and hopelessness that were stalking about them.

After supper on the evening before the wedding day, Roddy and Jason were at work in the sitting room of the stone house. From the oak beams at one end of the room they suspended a wooden lattice which, when decked early the next morning with chokecherry and plum blossoms, would form a bower above the bride and groom for the ceremony.

Paula, flushed and giddy and tremulous at being the inspiration of all this ado, was watching the progress of Roddy's and Jason's work when Corinne entered in her green tweed riding habit.

"Hullo!" she called gaily. "What on earth are you making there, Roddy?"

Roddy looked down at her, then continued to pound a nail into place. "I think it's a canopy—or something like that," he said. "Or it will be when the flowers are up."

"Oh—I think that will be *very* nice!" Corinne exclaimed.

"You're back early," Roddy said. "Didn't the Richters give you a nice dinner party?"

Corinne seated herself. "It was all right. They had a lot of dull people up from town—rather tiresome. I was just as well pleased anyhow. I wanted to get back and see if there wasn't something I could do to help."

“There ain’t much left to do,” Sophronia said briskly, “except to put the blossoms up in the morning—and fill the vases. The girls have finished frosting the little cakes. That was a nice recipe you gave me, Corinne. After Paula goes, we’ll have to get together and make some for ourselves.”

Corinne pulled off her gauntlets. She laughed evasively. “I’m going to miss Paula terribly,” she said, and made a sweet, dejected little moue at the big German girl, who was still standing with her red hands pressed nervously against the back of a chair.

“I guess that’s about all we can do with it now,” Roddy observed as he got down from the step-ladder and stood surveying the work he and Jason had done.

A few moments later he and Corinne left for the big house. As soon as they were outside, Corinne took his arm and drew herself close to him.

“I want you to do something for me, darling,” she said in her sweetest manner.

“What now?” he asked with a smile. “I’ve given you all the money I—”

“It isn’t money,” she said quickly. “I simply *can’t* be at the wedding tomorrow. And I want you to explain it to the family.”

Roddy looked at her, his brows gathering. “You can’t be at the wedding?”

“I know it sounds terrible to you, darling,” she went on. “But Evelyn Richter told me tonight that Harrison’s are having a big sale tomorrow in the city—just for one day. It’s an awfully exclusive shop, you know, and I’ll be saving money if I take advantage of the sale. I can stay over night at the Lombards’ and it won’t mean any extra expense.”

“It’ll cost you six dollars in gas to go there and back in the car—and more if you take the bus,” Roddy said.

“Evelyn is going down first thing in the morning and she has promised to call for me and bring me back.”

“What’s the matter with the shops in Maynard?”

Corinne laughed. “Roddy—there isn’t a thing in Maynard that looks like anything on me. I’ve tried everywhere. The hats make me look like Mrs. Folds.”

Roddy was silent for a moment. “You mean—you’ve made arrangements for Evelyn to call for you in the morning?”

“Why not? It will save the price of the trip.”

“But, Lord! How am I going to explain it to the folks?”

“Oh, dear! I thought you would be able to help me out. It’s the first time I’ve ever—”

“Paula will feel hurt no matter what I say to—”

“I’ll speak to Paula tonight. I might fib a little, if necessary, and tell her I have to go to mother.”

“Why not tell her the truth—if you have to tell her anything?”

“After all, Roddy, there’s no need of hurting the girl’s feelings any more than necessary.”

“It seems to me you aren’t giving much consideration to her feelings as it is.”

Corinne drew away from him. “I have done far more for her than lots of women would for their maids. You seem to forget that I’ve suffered no end of embarrassment ever since I knew that Jason was going to marry her. Having a maid working for you every day—and knowing that she is going to marry one of the family—I’ve never said anything about it, but—”

“What’s wrong with it?” Roddy demanded.

Corinne shrugged her shoulders. “Well—I don’t expect you to see it from my point of view, of course. After all, it’s none of my business. What I think—or feel—doesn’t seem to matter much anyhow.”

Anger flamed suddenly within Roddy. He checked the retort that sprang to his lips. They had arrived before the doorway of the big house. He turned away abruptly and started for the barnyard.

“Aren’t you coming in?” Corinne asked in surprise.

“I have some work to do first,” he told her.

She paused with her hand on the door. “But—what shall I do about tomorrow morning? Evelyn is coming immediately after breakfast.”

“Do whatever you like about it,” he said. “I don’t give a damn!”

In the afternoon of the next day, Jason and Paula departed in the second-hand Ford which Jason had bought for eighty-five dollars. Rice and old shoes—the latter to be frugally retrieved afterwards—showered the car as it moved through the gate to the shouts and laughter of the wedding-guests. It had been a fine wedding, Sophronia thought with a swelling heart, as fine as any farmer could afford these days.

Under the big oak a number of the farm boys had seated themselves and were tuning up on guitar, accordion, harmonica and violin. Presently a lively melody was lilting upward through the rugged branches of the tree and it

seemed to Sophronia, as she paused to listen—still in an abstraction of thought about Jason—that the little new leaves on the tree quivered to the rhythm.

“I’m wool-gatherin’,” she rebuked herself sharply.

In the open space of the dooryard and around the tree, people young and old were dancing and laughing or singing in voices that paid little respect to tune or pitch.

“Come on, Phronie!” old Roderick called, his eyes wistfully following Silver and the older Michener boy as they exhibited an intricate and amusing fox-trot step.

“Oh, go on with you!” Phronie expostulated, blushing, and was forthwith swept into Roderick’s old-fashioned and courtly embrace.

Twice, three times around the circle of the great oak’s shade they waltzed, old Roderick adapting his knowledge of dance figures resolutely and gallantly to the outlandish new tempo amidst cheers and clapping of hands. At last, breathless and bridling rosily as a girl, Sophronia stopped in front of the door. Old Roderick bowed low over her hand, and the applause and laughter whirled about them.

“Go on with you, silly!” Sophronia said, and gave Roderick a little push. “I’m thinkin’ the cider pitchers need fillin’.”

In the kitchen she found Roddy alone, standing before the north window, which faced the back yard and the wooded rise beyond the old out-buildings. His elbows rested on the middle frame of the sash, and his hands were locked behind his head.

“Why don’t you go out and join in the fun?” she asked.

“I guess I’m not in the mood,” he replied.

Phronie gave him a sharp glance. “Small wonder!” she remarked. “When do you expect Corinne back?”

“Tomorrow night,” Roddy said, without looking around.

“Well—I don’t understand what got into her to go off—”

“I’d rather not talk about it,” Roddy interrupted.

“No—I suppose the least said about it the better,” Phronie agreed. She went to the cupboard and took down from a high shelf a bottle of peach brandy she kept for special emergencies, chills and the like. She poured out a generous measure and took it to Roddy.

“Here,” she said sturdily, “take this. It may help thaw you out a little.”

Roddy looked at her with a crooked grin. To please her he tossed off the drink. Then he went and seated himself in a chair beside the kitchen table

which was loaded with napkin-covered trays of sandwiches and cakes and varieties of pickles and salads for the refreshing of the wedding-guests before they took their departure.

“Well, I don’t know what to think about it,” Phronie observed, “but I wouldn’t go moonin’ about the house for anyone. I never did—and I never would. Why don’t you get out and dance with the rest of them? No one will ever thank you for bein’ a soft-hearted fool over any woman, even if she is your wife.”

Roddy began impatiently rolling a cigarette. “A devil of a lot you know about it!” he exploded.

Phronie looked at him in surprise. “I know you’ve never talked like that to me in your life before,” she said.

Roddy got to his feet and put an arm about her. “I don’t mean it like that, ma,” he said affectionately. “You know I don’t. But there’s more to this than I want to talk about. You probably don’t know it—but I didn’t pay Paula any wages last month. And now that she’s gone, I don’t know how we’re going to get along up at the house. I can’t afford another girl, and Corinne doesn’t know a darn thing about housework. Even if she did—she isn’t strong enough to do it.”

It was on the tip of Sophronia’s tongue to express her own private opinion about that, but she held herself in check.

“Have you told Corinne about that?” she asked.

“Yes,” he said darkly, “I told her.”

“Well, there’s no use borrowin’ trouble. Corinne will swing into it when she knows she has to, like anyone else. I’ll come up now and then to help her get started—and Silver will be glad to give a hand when it’s needed. I don’t know how I’d do without that girl. But you stop your worryin’ now, and take a fresh jug of cider out to the bunch. They’ve got a powerful thirst, that outfit!”

Corinne did not return on the following afternoon. She telephoned Roddy to explain that she had not completed her shopping and that rather than drive home after dark, Evelyn Richter preferred to stay in town for the night. She herself would stay with the Lombards. And was the wedding a lot of fun, and how was he feeling? Roddy, listening to her tumbling, sweetly inflected questions, and giving his monosyllabic replies, stared at the wall beside the telephone.

Even after he had hung up the receiver, he continued to stare at the same spot on the wall. There had been something in Corinne's voice—an over-emphasis of apology, of solicitude. . . . But perhaps his own feeling of insecurity had qualified her voice with a falseness that was not there. Perhaps he had only imagined that her contrition was brittle and perfunctory. Perhaps . . .

He went heavily upstairs to wash before going down to his father's house, with old Steve, for their early supper. There would be an hour of daylight after that and he would be able to finish seeding the cornfield on the east section.

He thought of the yellow corn he grew, rich and full-eared and sound as the sun. In times like these, when a farmer got little more than a romantic satisfaction out of what he grew, he was justified in contemplating with affection such corn as that. He hoped no obstacles of nature would come between the planting and the maturing of his crop. He wished fervently to see before midway of summer the blond silks enveloped in a firmer, fuller green than they had ever been before.

He had tried to talk to Corinne about his corn, but she had given him only her patient smile. "You would have made a good artist, Roddy," she said once, "—one of these futurist artists who usually starve to death in a garret unless they have a patron."

Roddy ran the brush aimlessly over his hair and returned downstairs where Steve was listening to the radio. He had it going, as he said, "full blast."

"Just takin' advantage of the missus's absence," Steve said with a guilty smile.

"Come on, let's go down and have supper," Roddy returned brusquely.

At the supper table, he told Sophronia that Corinne would not be home until some time tomorrow. "You'll have Steve and me on your hands for another day," he said.

"And why not?" Phronie replied. "Though the way you're boltin' your food, I have a notion to let you go without."

Steve chuckled. "It's that cornfield of his," he volunteered. "He's scared it won't be there in the morning."

"Are you going back to finish it tonight, Roddy?" his father asked.

Roddy did not raise his eyes. "I'm going to try," he said.

Phronie glanced across at him. "I was hopin' you'd stay around tonight. It's sort o' lonesome with Jase and Paula gone. Have another cup of tea. And

take it easy or you'll be gettin' your stomach all upset."

He gave a short laugh that fell ominously on Sophronia's ears. Then he remained as preoccupied as if he were alone at the table. It occurred to Sophronia that Silver, too, appeared lost in her own thoughts. Once, when she returned from the kitchen to replenish the platter of fried potatoes, she caught Silver staring at Roddy with a stricken expression in her eyes. Something, Phronie concluded, was amiss, and unless she was a dundering idiot, she knew what it was.

The meal over, Roddy left the table immediately and started for the fields. Sophronia, watching him through the screen door as his lean figure moved up against the yellow light that washed the slope, fell to uneasy pondering.

"That corn of his is just an excuse," she declared. "He's workin' his head off these days to keep from goin' crazy with worry. It ain't fair!"

"Well, it won't do much good if you add your worry to his," old Roderick remarked.

Phronie began clearing the table. "He looks like misery itself—walkin' up the hill there—with his shoulders slumpin' like an old man."

Roderick glanced at the mantel where his pipe lay, and made as though to get up. Silver handed him the pipe and his tobacco pouch and matches. Steve, with an elaborate flourish, took from his vest pocket a five-cent cigar.

"You don't have to go far to find the reason for it," Steve observed.

"That'll do now, Steve!" old Roderick rebuked him. "We've all been through enough to know that talking doesn't mend matters. I remember the time when you got into a fix with that girl in the circus that came to Maynard. You didn't want to do much talking about that, did you?"

Steve blushed reminiscently, though not so much with shame as pleasure.

"Well, if next fall is goin' to be worse than last, like the papers say," Phronie put in, "what's the use in a young fellow like Roddy slavin' in the fields, growin' old before his time?"

"It ain't work that's killin' him," Steve persisted boldly, and hurried out of the house to escape the censure that was sure to come if he stayed.

Old Roderick drew thoughtfully at his pipe. "Whatever is to be will be," he said finally, "and there's no preventing either mildew or a good harvest."

In the shadows that were gathering in the rear of the kitchen, Silver was pouring hot water from a tea-kettle into the dishpan in the sink. Like a

striking of cymbals, old Roderick's words smote a dark music into her mind
. . . "There's no preventing either mildew or a good harvest."



CHAPTER NINETEEN

It was already dark before Corinne returned home on the following evening. Roddy had anxiously gone down to the gate and beyond it several times, harassed by the fear that some accident might have happened, and had at last resigned himself to waiting in the house, where he smoked one cigarette after another and kept his ear alert for the ringing of the telephone or for the sound of a car in the driveway.

With a shock of relief he finally heard the muffled approach of Evelyn's Richter's automobile. He hurried to the kitchen where he had a pot of coffee ready to place on the gasoline stove. He lit the stove and set the pot over the flame. Then he went out of the back door just as the car came to a stop in the yard.

Corinne stepped down and Roddy put his arms about her.

"Corrie!" he cried. "What has kept you so late? I've been imagining all sorts of things—accidents—"

Corinne laughed and released herself. "Nonsense! Help me get these parcels out. Evelyn has to hurry."

Roddy and Evelyn exchanged greetings and Corinne began at once to remove the parcels from the car. She handed one of them to Roddy.

"Take this box, Roddy, darling, but be careful with it. That's my precious new hat!"

In a moment Roddy's arms were full and Evelyn called her hasty good night and drove away.

In the living room, Corinne's purchases were placed on the couch.

"I have some coffee percolating for you, Corrie," Roddy said. "While you unwrap those things I'll go and get it."

"Sweet of you, Roddy," Corinne said absently, while she untied a string that bound her hat-box.

When he returned with the two cups of coffee and set them on the small table in the corner of the room, Corinne came in from the hall where she had

put on her new hat in front of the mirror in the hatrack.

“Isn’t it darling!” she exclaimed, resting her head sideways toward her shoulder as she smiled up at him. Roddy squinted with amusement at the tiny medallion of navy blue straw, with its glossy *coq* feather slipped down on one side.

“Very fetching,” he laughed.

“And, Roddy!” Corinne drew a deep breath. “Only eight-fifty—reduced from twenty-one dollars! And it will do me until fall.”

Roddy grinned. “I confess I don’t know where they get the idea of tagging that at twenty-one bucks.”

“Why—Roddy! Don’t you adore it?”

“Sure! It looks great, but—”

“Of course, it’s exclusive. You’ve got to pay for models like this unless —”

“What else did you get?” he asked her, seating himself. “You’d better drink your coffee before it gets cold.” He picked up his own cup and stirred it thoughtfully.

Corinne unwrapped a box containing a pair of high-heeled, blue-kid pumps. “These were on sale, too. Eighteen dollars—reduced to eleven-fifty. Aren’t they sweet? Cut steel buckles—the buckles are expensive, you know, but they’ll do on other shoes later.” She picked a cigarette from a small box on the table. “I’ll take the other things upstairs to unpack them. You wouldn’t be interested in them. Stockings—gloves—underwear—and I simply had to have a bottle of toilet water and some face cream and powder. Those things look small, but they count up when you come to buy them.” She laughed. “I have only forty-five cents left out of what you gave me, Roddy.”

Roddy regarded her with dull wonder. “I thought you had enough of those—those small things to do you till doomsday.”

“Why—Roddy! I brought that all with me when I was married. And anyhow—”

“Didn’t you get yourself a dress, or a coat, or anything—anything substantial?” he asked her, and felt immediately that what he had said was somewhat incoherent.

Corinne laughed, but Roddy thought there was a hard little edge to her laugh. “How could I—with what you gave me? There’s no economy in buying cheap things that will look like rags in a week. I can wait until—”

“You’ll probably have to wait for quite a while,” he observed somberly.

She lifted her eyebrows and smiled at him archly. "You're always so pessimistic, Roddy," she reproached him sweetly. "I heard today that the price of beef has gone up—and haven't we a lot of calves and things to go to market pretty soon?"

Roddy got up and ran his fingers through his hair. "I can't believe you're so stupid, Corinne," he said in bewilderment. "What if beef does go up a few cents? Can't you see that we'll need every penny just to keep going?"

"Well—after all, I don't know anything about such things," she protested negligently. "And I hate discussing money matters."

"I guess there must be something the matter with me," he muttered, and as he heard his own voice he was struck with the utter strangeness of it. "I have done my best to explain our position to you, Corinne. I told you I had overdrawn my account at the bank before we sold the grain. You either can't understand—or you don't care. I wish to God you'd tell me which it is!"

Corinne walked over to the piano and idly struck a key with one finger. It happened to be sourly out of tune. As though the sound of it had set her nerves on edge, she swung about and faced Roddy with blazing eyes.

"I can't stand this business of counting every penny like a newsboy in the streets! If that's what you want me to understand, you may as well know now that I never shall. I won't try. You may be used to this hand-to-mouth existence. You probably love it—because of your precious land! I'm the one that has to suffer. I do the best I can with the miserable few dollars you give me and all the thanks I get is the insinuation that I should have done ten times as much with it. I suppose I should have bought a two-dollar dress and a five-dollar coat and a pair of shoes in a bargain basement!"

She stood before him, small and white and trembling with outrage. Roddy regarded her with dawning incredulity. It did not seem quite possible to him that anyone could be so selfish, so petty, so lacking in personal integrity—and worst of all, in an ordinary sense of proportion.

He looked down at her, his hands thrust deep into the pockets of his trousers. "You and I have a balance of one hundred and ninety dollars in the bank. That will have to do us until we get something out of the corn crop—and that may be next to nothing. You can figure it out for yourself."

He turned away from her and walked to the other side of the room. He felt as though confusion and humiliation were swarming over him like red ants. He could not look at Corinne. And in his heart he knew with wretched certainty that it was because he was ashamed, not of himself, but of her.

Corinne gripped the back of a chair and spoke in a voice so charged with vindictiveness that Roddy found it hard to credit his senses.

“You’re evidently too much of a clod—born and bred—to have any ambition beyond grovelling in a corn-patch! You’ve got me to the place now where I’ll have to do my own housework. You want to make a slattern out of me. All right—I’ll do my best to be one!” Her voice rose hysterically. “But I am going to tell you one thing—it won’t be for long! If I ever get the chance to get away from it, I’ll go!”

Roddy came over to her. Corinne’s tempers were by now nothing new to him. He smiled good-naturedly and resting one foot on the rung of the chair in front of her, he placed his hands over her own.

“You don’t mean that, Corrie,” he said gently.

She snatched her hands away. “Why wouldn’t I mean it?” she flamed. “What have you done for me?”

Roddy did not know afterwards how it came about. He knew only that some frozen area of despair within him seemed suddenly to burst and boil up into an overpowering rage.

“What have I done for you?” he rasped. “Do you want to know? I’ve lost my self-respect—and I’ve almost lost my mind—trying to make you happy!”

Insolent and cold still, Corinne watched him with a wary fascination, her hands on her hips. Then, at her small tinkling laugh he lost complete control of himself. He stepped toward her and the soft collapse of her shoulders beneath the grip of his hands as he shook her only incited him to greater fury.

She wrenched herself free and at that moment a handkerchief dropped from her blouse and fell to the floor. There was a sharp metallic click and Corinne sprang to pick up the square of lace and linen. Something in her manner prompted Roddy to snatch it from her before she had quite recovered it. Folded in the handkerchief was a monogrammed onyx and gold cigarette case—a smaller replica of one Roddy had seen in the possession of Gerald Lucas.

“What’s this?” he demanded.

The chill that was sweeping through his body now took possession of his voice, his eyes, his hands, as he held the trinket before him.

“I bought it,” Corinne said in a sullen, defiant voice.

He looked at her for a moment before he spoke. “You’re lying to me,” he said at last.

“You’d say that, of course,” she retorted. “I might have known what to expect of you.”

“Who gave it to you?” he persisted.

“What right have you to ask?” Corinne screamed. “Do you ever give me anything? If I live to be a hundred—”

“Keep still!” Roddy said frigidly. “You don’t have to tell me who gave you this thing.” He tossed it on the table, then turned and faced her. “Corrie,” he went on, “it begins to look like a show-down between you and me. Perhaps I did you an injustice in marrying you. But I loved you. When you married me—it was just a way out for you, wasn’t it? It wasn’t because you were in love with me.”

He stood with folded arms, waiting for her to speak. For a moment or two, she moved in inarticulate frenzy to and fro across the room, pulling at her finger tips and uttering little choked gasps through her parted lips. Gradually within Roddy a dispassionate pity replaced every other emotion.

“Isn’t that true, Corrie?” he urged.

She stopped suddenly. The look of panic and helplessness that darkened her eyes as she turned them upon him now created in him a feeling of utter frustration.

“I can’t stand this!” she cried, and flinging herself down upon the couch, burst into tears.

Roddy went and stood before her, then put his hand down and stroked her loose, dusky hair. His throat felt full and sore, but in the place where he supposed his heart must be, there was a sensation of dark emptiness. A vacated house, he supposed, must feel that way at night. He knew now that it must have stood empty for a long time, but he had refused to acknowledge the fact.

It would be much easier if he did not have this pity that obsessed him.

“I’m sorry, Corinne,” he said stonily, “but you’ll just have to make the best of it. If you can’t stand this life—and me—there ought to be a way out of it. In the meantime—you’re still my wife. And as long as you are, you’re not going to make a fool of either yourself or me. You’ll return this thing to Lucas tomorrow—by mail—or I’ll take it back to him myself. You can choose for yourself.”

He dropped his hand inertly at his side and went from the room, through the house and out the back door. His dog, Noah, rose with sedate pleasure and followed him through the faintly moonlit yard.

Roddy stood leaning against the pasture bars, as he had done one night almost a year ago after he had proposed to Corinne Meader. The prone, dark hulks of horses lying on the ground seemed to soothe him. Several of the beasts came up to the gate and he stroked their soft, searching muzzles, one

after another. He felt in his coat pocket and found a few lumps of sugar, dusted the shreds of smoking tobacco from them, and held them over the bars.

At the sound of a footfall behind him, he turned and saw Silver Grenoble coming down the palely lit hillside. There was an embarrassed diffidence in her manner as she came and stood beside him.

“You heard the racket, I suppose,” he said abruptly.

Silver hesitated. “I couldn’t help hearing it,” she told him. “I was on my way up to the house to see what Corinne had bought—”

“It doesn’t matter,” Roddy replied, resting his arms on the bars once more. “Hell—nothing matters much!”

“That isn’t true, and you know it isn’t,” Silver said quickly. “You’ve got to take care of Corinne, Roddy. There’s no telling what she may do when she gets into a mood like this. I’m afraid for her.”

He looked down at her with gloomy, burning eyes. “We all need taking care of,” he laughed curtly.

“But you’ve got to be patient with her.”

“Patient!” he echoed. “I’ve been too damned patient! I’ve let her go and hang herself.”

Silver tightened her lips. “There isn’t any use in my trying to talk to you, I see.”

He turned on her suddenly. “What do you know about it? I suppose everybody is aware of what has been going on under my very nose—everybody but me.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Silver replied in a remote tone.

“I’m talking about this rotter, Lucas—who followed you here from Chicago. He and Corinne have been together in the city.”

“Are you sure?”

Roddy hesitated. “I’m not sure of anything,” he evaded finally. “And I’m not asking any questions, either. From now on I’m going to take a little less for granted. If Corinne wants to go around with Lucas and his gang, she can do so—but she can’t stay here.”

Silver put her hand on Roddy’s arm. “Don’t talk like that,” she begged. “Corinne will realize that she wants you more—more than she wants anything else. Go on back to the house and be nice to her.”

Roddy patted the hand that lay on his arm. “That’s all right, kid,” he said abstractedly. “I know what you’re trying to do. But the fact is, it may be

impossible. Just now I don't feel like being particularly nice to anyone. I'm not going to force myself on Corinne."

"You're just being proud—and stubborn," Silver argued.

"All right. Let it go at that. There was a night last December—that night when you came rushing into my arms—and told me that my work-room had been broken into—when I could have said things—and done things, too, that would have shocked you. I could have fallen in love with you that night—if it hadn't been for my pride. There's a place for pride—and stubbornness, too."

She withdrew her hand and for a moment there was silence between them.

"You'd better run along to the house," he said finally, "and leave me to work this out in my own way."

Without a word, Silver slipped away into the darkness. A sensation of being suddenly bereft suffused Roddy as he watched her go. While she had been there talking to him, he had been able to exteriorate his problem, regard it as something not essentially a part of him, something transient, like an acute but not fatal illness. Cool and remote as Silver Grenoble always seemed, she had a warm and generous heart. He knew that now. Perhaps it was that fact that had drawn him to her on that cold, blowing dusk in December. She had a warmth of soul which Corinne, with all her physical lusciousness, could not approach.

In a little while, with a dazed and insecure feeling, he went back to the house. In the living room, he paused and looked about him. Corinne had gone upstairs. Her cup of coffee stood on the small table, untouched and cold. A thin film of cream had risen and covered the surface. He took the lamp and went upstairs. Corinne was not in their room. Startled, he spoke her name. When there was no response, he carried the lamp and gently opened the door of the "spare" room across the hall. Corinne was sleeping there, her soft, round arm thrown above her head. Her face was lovely and untroubled as a child's.



CHAPTER TWENTY

THE sun scattered flakes of yellow light over old Roderick where he sat beneath the great oak mending harness. He glanced up at Silver as she came out of the door and paused to smile down at him.

“Where are you going so early in the morning—and all dressed up?” he asked with a twinkle.

“Dressed up?” Silver retorted. “These old things are just about ready to fall off me!” She inspected a worn spot on the knee of her gray riding breeches.

“Well,” Roderick observed, “with that waist and that red tie, you look pretty tony to me.”

“I’m just going to give Rusty an airing,” Silver laughed. “Do you think it will rain?” She glanced up at the sky, not because she was interested in the weather, but because she wanted to change the subject.

“No,” the old man replied lugubriously, “though we need it, the Lord knows. This dry weather isn’t going to do Roddy’s corn much good. But it’s going to be dry, mark my words. I can tell by the way the birds are nesting. And it’ll be a terror, after no snow to speak of this winter.”

He picked up his awl and drove it fervently through a leather strap. Silver kissed the little bald spot on the top of his head and went off to the pasture to whistle for Rusty.

In a few minutes she had him saddled and was on her way to pay her first visit to Gerald Lucas at the Emerald Bay Club. The morning was bland and blue, the sky empty and clear as a shell. Beneath the anxiety of her contemplated interview with Gerald lay the shadow of old Roderick’s prediction. Drought. He had spoken of it as some weary old patriarch of Biblical times might have done. He dwelt now in that twilight where all that came to pass was inevitable, the good with the bad, for he had lived his life in the best way he knew, in his heart, indifferent to living or dying. At sixty-odd, he was done with striving, for the earth on which he lived had ordained it should be so.

The wood road which was a short-cut to the Club tunnelled through a striated, amber and green gloom of trees, ruffled only by the swift cleaving of a bird's wing or a bird's ecstatic song. What a pity, Silver thought, that Corinne was so made that she could not find an ample joy in so simple a thing as a morning in May woods!

But here was the lodge where Gerald lived, set back from the lake shore, among the trees, a discreet distance from the rather garish and sprawling hotel club. Silver dismounted and stood for a moment glancing nervously about her. It was not yet nine o'clock. Perhaps Gerald would still be in bed. That possibility had not occurred to her when she set out on her errand. Then, with a firm resolution to rouse him if need be, she went to the rustic porch and rang the doorbell.

Gerald's "man" responded to the ring. Presently, in a low-ceiled living room adorned with what she supposed were trophies of the chase, with bear rugs on the floor, and a field-stone fireplace at one end of it, Silver stood and waited for Gerald Lucas to appear. No doubt Corinne had been in this room—with the Richters or others—perhaps alone with Gerald. During that minute or two while she waited, Silver came to know Corinne Willard as she had never known her before. Corinne wanted the excitement and glamor of a life that Silver had always hated. In this very room, perhaps, Corinne had stood and dreamed of an exotic, thrilling career, herself the jewelled arbiter in a worldly and extravagant scene. Corinne Meader, the daughter of a small-town banker . . . It was pathetic!

Gerald stood in the doorway, his hands thrust into the pockets of a purple velvet dressing gown.

"A lady!" he laughed. "That's what Broatch said. And it's you, darling!" He came toward her with his arms outstretched.

Silver put out her hand. "He's not around—listening, is he?" she asked.

"Not at all," he smiled. "I don't run my place like that. Broatch is very discreet. Now—what brings a lady here at this ungodly hour? Have you no pity for a poor working man—or are you the *belle dame sans merci*? Rather good, that, eh, darling—for so early in the morning?"

He drew a chair for her, then seated himself.

Silver leaned forward, her hands clenched in her lap.

"I'm in a very serious mood, Gerald," she began. "I've come to talk to you about Corinne."

While he searched his pocket for a cigarette, Gerald raised a puzzled eyebrow. "Corinne?" he said. "Well—I have no objections to a little talk about Corinne. She's a nice kid."

“You’ve got to leave her alone, Gerald,” Silver said promptly.

“But—my dear child!” he protested. “What have I done that justifies your getting me out of bed to tell me that?”

Silver looked at him with challenge in her eyes. “Gerald, there’s no use in our beating about the bush. Roddy Willard and Corinne had a quarrel last night. She went to the city the other day—in spite of the fact that Roddy’s brother was getting married—and stayed away longer than there was any need. Were you with her?”

Gerald blew a cloud of smoke from his lips and smiled at her. “Darling—you ought to know me better than to ask questions of that sort.”

“Then you were with her,” Silver said. “Now—are you going to leave her alone?”

Gerald moved uncomfortably in his chair. “Look here, Silver,” he replied, “your little friend is quite capable of looking after herself. I understand her life isn’t exactly exciting. If she steps out once in a while—”

“You are getting away from my question,” Silver reminded him. Her eyes hardened and an angry red sprang into her cheeks. “I am *not* going to have you spoiling the lives of two people—”

“Silver!” he interrupted her. “I’ll be honest with you for old time’s sake. I like the little girl. In fact, I’m sort of smitten on her—as you probably gathered when you surprised us that day in the woods.”

“Does Corinne know I saw you?”

“Don’t be silly, darling. I’m still able to hold the attention of a lady when I put my mind to it. It would have complicated things for everyone concerned if she had caught a glimpse of you. That’s another of the little secrets you and I have between us. However—don’t you think you can leave this little affair in my hands—where it belongs?”

Silver, dangerously close to tears, bit her lip. “I shall leave it in your hands, Gerald, only on the condition that you promise to stop seeing Corinne.”

He blew a complacent smoke-ring toward the heavy beams of the ceiling. “And if I don’t feel like accepting your condition?”

Silver’s heart sank. Dispiritedly she got to her feet. “I didn’t think you could be so absolutely heartless,” she said. “I have done my best to appeal to your sense of decency. If this affair brings you more trouble than you expect, don’t blame me. I’ve given you sufficient warning.”

Gerald got up from his chair. “Of course—that puts it in a slightly different light, darling. You are actually threatening me?”

“Use your own judgment, Gerald,” she replied with an aloof smile. “I am sorry to say this, but you are forcing me to remind you that a man in your position has to move carefully. I think I’ve seen enough of this life to convince me that you can’t afford to take chances.”

He took her arm as she started for the door. “You’ve gone rural in a big way, my dear,” he observed. “But I still believe in you. You’re not going to throw me down, are you?”

She hesitated, breathless and confused at the fixed, almost sad smile that altered the expression of Gerald’s face.

“I’m going to do just what I think is best,” she replied. “You’ll have time to think it over, at any rate.”

He went with her to the door and watched her mount Rusty and ride out through the west entrance of the lodge. Then he went back into the house and stood before the fireplace, his hands thrust deep into the pockets of his dressing gown.

Just beyond the gate, Silver met Duke Melbank in his Ford. He came to a stop and doffed his hat with a broad grin.

“Good morning, Silver!” he greeted her. “I’m just bringing the milk up to the lodge. Mister Lucas is out o’ bed, eh?” The look he gave her as he leaned over the door of his car was so disgustingly meaningful that Silver’s cheeks flamed.

“Find out for yourself,” she said scornfully as she turned Rusty aside to pass.

“I’m coming round to see you one of these nights myself,” Duke called after her as she sent Rusty into a spirited canter along the road.

For days Silver went about with a feeling of a physical weight pulling downward on her body, as though she had got herself entangled in an ugly gray mesh from which there was no escape.

There was much work to do in the garden, where Sophronia was setting out the young tomato plants and putting in stakes and runners for the peas and beans. Silver had begun a rock garden too in a sunny niche on the hill above the creek. But it was impossible to escape the thought that beat like hammers in her mind all day and all night.

She had been childish in expecting anything but cynical ridicule from Gerald. In his codeless philosophy his relationship to Corinne was even innocent. He would continue to see Corinne unless Corinne herself chose to put an end to their meeting.

The month drew to a close in parching and unseasonable heat. Except for an ineffectual shower or two there had been no rain. In the rosy, cloudless sunsets when Sophronia and Silver were at work in the garden, they would see Roddy coming home from the east cornfield, his face growing more distraught and weary every evening.

Sophronia weeded and watered the vegetable garden with an almost religious zeal. "If I've got to use up every drop in the wells and the creek to boot," she remarked, "I'm goin' to see to it that we have enough garden truck to last the winter anyhow."

She and Silver carried water sprinklers where the hose would not reach, and moved on hands and knees down the long gray furrows of earth, pulling weeds and watching against the ravages of insects.

"It's the limit!" Phronie sighed. "Weeds will thrive where everything else shrivels up."

Usually they devoted the early part of the day to the vegetables, attending to their housework during the hotter hours, and returning to their garden again when it became cooler.

"I've had something on my mind all morning," Sophronia said one afternoon when she and Silver were at work in the kitchen. "I might as well get it off now as to go on stewin' over it by myself."

Silver gave her an anxious glance. "What is it, Phronie?"

"I was out early this morning," Phronie went on, "earlier than ordinary. I went up to take a look at them young turkeys. You see that washin' on the line up there?" She pointed through the window to Roddy's back yard. "At five o'clock this morning, Roddy was hangin' out sheets and pillow cases and shirts!"

"Perhaps Corinne isn't equal to it, Phronie," Silver said.

The older woman gave a heavy sigh. "Equal to it!" she burst out. "I'd like to know what she *is* equal to. I've been doin' everything I can to help her—and show her how to do things that any woman knows without bein' shown—and when we're through she sits down and massages her hands and manicures her finger nails like someone that's been raised in a palace. She hates work—that's all there is to it. And anybody that hates work—" She paused thoughtfully. "I don't know where the two of them are headin' to, I declare!"

Silver glanced down at her own hands, saw the short, roughened nails and the skin that had been browned from the sun and the work out of doors. But it was not fair to compare herself with Corinne, she reflected. She, Silver Grenoble, was living here and taking a part in the life here of her own

free will and because it satisfied some deep instinct in her nature. If this life became intolerable to her, she still had enough money in the bank to take her away from it. Whereas Corinne—Corinne had only Roddy Willard, whom she had married. . . .

After supper, the Richters drove up to the side of the big house and were met by Roddy and Corinne. There was much laughter and shouting, and Silver, seated with old Roderick beneath the great oak, observed Harry Richter trying to draw Roddy into the car, although Roddy was still in overalls. Corinne looked diaphanous and lovely in a chiffon dress that Sophronia had dyed and made over for her. When the car made its departure, Corinne was seated in front between Harry Richter and a woman who was a stranger to Silver.

Instead of going back indoors, Roddy sauntered down to the old house.

“Why didn’t you knock off and go down to the lake with Harry?” old Roderick asked.

“I’ve got to go over to Jason’s,” Roddy told him. “He called up today and wants those two Hereford calves brought up. I told him I’d run them over tonight in the truck.”

“I’d go along, but I promised to take Phronie over to see the Ericksons tonight,” old Roderick said. “I’d like to see Jase. It’s two weeks since we’ve been up. How’s everything up there?”

“Fine, I guess. He got that rain we thought was coming here. Are you going to Ericksons’, Silver?”

“I don’t think so,” Silver replied. “I’ve started making myself a dress and I feel like finishing it tonight.”

“All right,” he returned. “I was just going to suggest that you might ride up to Jason’s with me—if you didn’t mind the truck. They wanted to see you.”

“Another time, Roddy. I think I’ll stay here and finish the dress.”

At nine o’clock, old Steve had gone to bed in Roddy’s house. There was no one else on the Willard farm except Silver. She had finished basting the seams of a figured linen dress and was taking it to the sewing machine in the corner of the dining room when she noticed that the sky had darkened curiously, and that the dry, hot wind that had been coming in through the dining room window had suddenly died.

Hopefully she went to the doorway and looked out. But no. The rain was passing to the southwest, and a baleful, green-white rim on the distant mass

of cloud meant that somewhere farther away the tender new fields would be levelled by hail.

Almost instantly, as though an icy hand had been laid upon the earth, the temperature dropped. Silver thought apprehensively of Sophronia, who had gone to the Ericksons' with only a light sweater over her shoulders.

It was a little after ten when Silver had the last stitch of her dress cut and tied. She removed the apron she was wearing and was about to put the new dress over her head when the outer door opened.

Silver looked around and saw Duke Melbank close the door behind him and lean against it, smiling.

"I've been peeking through the window," he chuckled. "I wouldn't 'a' had the nerve to come in—if anybody was round."

Silver backed away from him, one hand feeling the way cautiously behind her.

"How dare you come in here!" she said quietly.

"I told you I was coming to see you some night, didn't I? Well, this is the night."

"Get out of this house!" Silver ordered him.

He came weaving toward her and Silver realized that he had been drinking.

"There's no use in you pretending to me, Silver," he said. "I seen you come out o' Lucas's place in the morning, didn't I? I'm a better man than him—and I've been thinking about you ever since that night I saw you in Chicago."

Silver was aware of only two things: Duke Melbank's inflamed, greedy eyes were the eyes of all the men who had tried to stroke her hair or touch her bare arms during those years when she had been in desperate fear of them all, during those years of undercurrents of violence before her father had died; and somewhere, behind her, on Sophronia's sewing table, there lay a heavy crystal paper-weight, a half-sphere that held magnified within it a scene of Niagara Falls.

"You don't have to be afraid of me, Silver," Duke persisted. "I want to marry you."

"You're drunk!" Silver temporized, and moved back cautiously toward the sewing machine.

"Sure I am—drunk with thinking about you," Duke laughed. He lunged toward her. "You've got awful pretty shoulders, Silver."

He was perhaps ten feet away from her when she stretched her hand out behind her and took a firm hold of the heavy crystal sphere that stood on Sophronia's sewing table.

It was then that the kitchen screen door opened with a sharp twang from its creaking hinges. A footfall sounded at the rear of the house.

Duke drew back immediately, looked once toward the kitchen, then vanished cat-like through the front door.

Silver sank down upon the chair beside the sewing machine and buried her head in her arms.

A moment later, Roddy stood in the doorway to the kitchen. He looked at her for a moment, perplexed, then came and leaned over her.

"What's wrong, Silver?" he asked.

She strove to speak. "Duke Melbank—he was here—just now."

"Duke Melbank! Where is he?"

Silver made a gesture toward the open doorway. "He went—when he heard you coming."

Roddy hurried to the door and stepped out into the darkness. Presently he came back and stood silently beside her. Silver, vacant-eyed, saw him pick up a pair of scissors from the leaf of the sewing machine, open and close them.

"Something will have to be done about that fellow," he said tersely. "I'll have to talk to him when I go to town tomorrow."

Silver looked at her hands. They were trembling as she clenched them in her lap. "I'm so glad you came. I might have killed him, Roddy."

"I came down to see if the folks were back," Roddy told her. His voice was uneven with the effort he was making to speak at all. "Jase and Paula are already expecting an addition to the family."

From beneath her lashes Silver saw Roddy lay the scissors down. She raised her eyes and saw his face. For seconds they stared at each other, tense and motionless. Then, involuntarily, Silver lifted her trembling hands toward him. Roddy caught them and knelt swiftly beside her. With a soft cry she slipped into his arms.

"Silver—dear, dear Silver," Roddy breathed and held her fiercely close to him.

Silver sobbed against his throat. "Oh, Roddy—Roddy! I can't help it. I love you. I've known it from the very beginning."

He strained her slender body to him, then taking her tear-stained face into his hands, he kissed her mouth with hard and solemn vehemence.

“We’ve both known,” he muttered at last, “—deep down, from the beginning.”

Her hands moved helplessly along his shoulders.

“That’s why I wanted to go away, Roddy.”

“I should have known that, too,” he said unsteadily. “Lord—what a fool I’ve been!”

They clung together for a moment in a desperate kind of joy. It was Silver who drew away.

Roddy paced distractedly back and forth across the room while they talked.

“I’ll leave,” Silver said tonelessly. “I must, Roddy. There is no other way out for us.”

He swung about and looked at her, his eyes darkening in a savage, trapped way. With a desolate feeling she watched him run his fingers agitatedly through his rough hair. But then suddenly a bleak and frosty sort of calm seemed to descend upon him. He came and stood before her, his arms folded, and stared down at her with a twisted smile of bitter resignation.

“You are right, of course,” he said in a harsh voice. “You and I—we have to do the decent thing—by her. I don’t know just why—but we have to.”

Silver stood up very straight.

“And you will keep on working this land, Roddy,” she said swiftly, “until you buy it from me. You know now that I never really wanted you to leave it.”

She stretched out her hand. He held it tightly in his own for a moment, then turned it, palm upward, to his lips. In the next instant he was gone.

When Sophronia came home that night, she was suffering from a chill, and on the following evening, Doctor Woodward told old Roderick that she was threatened with pneumonia.



CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

WEEKS of illness had bitten deeply into the physical being of Sophronia Willard, but had not dimmed the fire of her spirit. As Silver arranged the cushions in the long chair in which Phronie reclined beneath the great oak, she glanced at the girl's face and said sharply, "By the looks of you, my girl, you need this babying more than I do. I'll be the death of you, if I don't get on my own feet soon."

Silver laughed deprecatingly and tucked the light blanket in around her aunt's feet. "Don't be silly!" she chided. "You would have done as much for me, darling—and more!" She glanced up at the sun, which was edging around the big house on the hill. "Perhaps I'd better move you a little closer to the tree. You need the sun, but it's going to be blistering in a little while."

"Whatever you think, Silver," Phronie returned. "It does beat all what a wreck the lung-fever can make of a big hulk of a woman like me. But I'll be on my feet again in a week—no matter what old Doc Woodward says."

"Don't get impatient, now," Silver rebuked her gently. "There's no hurry. You've done enough work in your life to deserve a little rest." She patted a pillow into place behind Sophronia's head. "There, now—lie back. You can read the paper for about fifteen minutes, then you must take a nap. No cheating, now—just fifteen minutes! Doctor Woodward's orders."

"Drat Doctor Woodward!" Sophronia folded the *Heron River Sentinel* in her lap and looked up at Silver with narrowed eyes. "I don't like the way you're lookin' lately," she declared with emphasis. "You're peaked—white. And your eyes are entirely too big and dark around. What's worryin' you?"

"Nothing, except you—and I haven't been worrying much about you since you started getting better," Silver assured her, but the faint flush that lay suddenly upon her smooth cheeks was not lost on Sophronia.

"That fool of a Duke Melbank hasn't been botherin' you again, has he?"

Silver's brow puckered into a little frown of laughing denial. "Certainly not! And you stop looking for trouble. You're ever so much better this morning. This sun is doing wonders for you."

“Yes,” Phronie sighed, “wonders for me—but what is it doin’ to the crops? It hasn’t really rained since I got sick, has it?”

“Now, there you go,” Silver rebuked her. “If it isn’t one thing, it’s another. Roddy says there’s no real danger yet, so get your mind—”

“I’ve seen it go like this before, my girl. I know what I’m talkin’ about. How does Roddy’s corn look?”

Silver hesitated. “Well—he’s been watering that plot he pollinated by hand. He says the big field doesn’t matter so much.”

“Hmph!” Phronie commented. “I guess he’s right. It won’t bring him more than twenty-five cents a bushel anyhow, the way things have been goin’. It’s a good thing he has that little plot to fuss about in these days. So long as he can keep it from dryin’ up, too.”

“Roddy’ll look after that,” Silver rejoined brightly. “He’s been tending it as though it were a new-born babe.”

Sophonra shifted herself to a more comfortable position in her chair. “I wish one of you would take a run up and see how Paula is,” she said uneasily. “We haven’t had a word from them in a week.”

Silver looked at her and put her hands on her hips. “*Will* you stop talking and worrying about things! I have to go and fix up the house. I’ll look out on you in fifteen minutes—and if you’re not asleep, I’ll call Doctor Woodward.”

“Oh, dear!” Sophronia sighed, settling herself finally.

“That’s better, now,” Silver said, turning away.

“And don’t forget to take the coffee down to the men,” Sophronia called after her. “They’ve been out there since sunrise—and I don’t suppose Corinne is out of bed yet.”

“I’ll go right now,” Silver said hastily, “if you promise to shut your eyes in fifteen minutes.”

“I promise,” Phronie remarked. “And you might bring me back some of those wild strawberries that grow in the rough next to the plot.”

Silver stood with a hamper containing a coffee pot and a dish of buttered rolls, and listened at the screen door of Roddy’s house. She was hoping that Corinne might go along with her down to the field where the men were at work, as she had done before. But there was no sound from within. Corinne was probably not yet awake. It was only a little after seven, and she had been at a dance last night at the Richter cottage on the lake.

Slowly, and with confused emotions, Silver moved through the yard and eastward toward the corn plot in the valley below where Roddy, with his

father and Steve, was at work. It was not the first time she had watched Roddy creating, by his delicate, deft guiding of nature, the evolution of a new species of life. There had been enough talk lately among the men for her to gather the nature of that process, to surmise the infinite care and patience required in achieving the desired results. But since the night of Duke Melbank's visit to the old stone house, she and Roddy had been at pains never to be alone together. But seeing Roddy at work in the intimate task of fertilizing his corn had been like looking into his very heart, like counting the beat of his life's blood.

This morning, Roddy was working alone at the upper end of the plot. Silver came quietly up to the old wooden fence that surrounded it, stepping carefully over the ripe strawberries Sophronia craved, and stood watching him, scarcely drawing a breath.

Carefully, intently, Roddy exposed the silk of the vivid green sheath beneath the transparent sack in which it had been enclosed, and poured upon it the pollen from the tassel, which had been painstakingly collected in a similar sack to prevent its scattering elsewhere on the wind.

The corn plot, in the motionless blue and gold atmosphere of early morning, was fixed in the clean dark of earth and the glistening, vertical green satin of the stalks, viable and proud. It was almost as though some great emerald stood between the small field and the sun, shedding a lovely, calm, and vertiginous dew upon the fresh curve of the young leaves, upon the purplish gloom of the furrows. But it was actually a dew of earth, before hot winds rose. Silver, standing in the rough meadow outside the field, felt the dew about her ankles and saw it sparkling on the ribboned leaves beneath Roddy's hands.

In the pure, jewelled light, the fragile, white-gold silks of the slim young ears received the yellow pollen as Roddy dusted it out of the tassel-bag. Suddenly, from the pasture near by, a meadow-lark flung up into the silence a fountain of liquid notes. Roddy glanced around and saw Silver leaning over the fence watching him.

He reddened dully and pushed his wide straw hat back from his brow. Then, with a quizzical, perplexed smile he came and stood looking down at her.

"I've been watching you," she said, nodding toward the corn. "I wish I could help."

"Why don't you?" he replied. "You'd get a real kick out of it."

She raised the hamper toward him. "I brought some fresh buttered rolls," she said.

“I suppose Corrie isn’t up yet,” he remarked, taking the hamper from her.

“I listened at the door,” Silver told him, “but I didn’t hear any stir, so I came on alone.”

He set the hamper on the grass at his feet, then spoke in a low, vehement voice that became a thrilling agony in her heart. “These weeks have been hell, Silver. I don’t know how I’ve stood it. I don’t know how I’m going to go on standing it—”

“Oh—Roddy,” she pleaded breathlessly.

He stepped closer to her and the yearning and despair in his bronzed face drew from her an involuntary, broken cry. She thrust her hands across the fence toward him. Roddy took them and pressed them to his lips and eyes.

“I’m no good, Silver,” he muttered. “I can’t go through with the farce. I’ve got to tell her—”

Swiftly Silver leaned forward and brushed his blue shirt-sleeve with her cheek. “Roddy—Roddy,” she whispered in a stifled voice. “You can’t tell her—you can’t ever tell her! It would be too terrible!”

“It wouldn’t,” he protested. “She doesn’t love me—I don’t think she ever did.”

“You mustn’t say that,” Silver argued. “You mustn’t do anything—you can’t! And it won’t be for long, Roddy. As soon as Phronie is well again—”

He swept his hat from his head and ran his fingers through his thick hair in a gesture of mortified anguish. “God—what a spectacle I am—standing here, talking like this! I have no right—” He broke off suddenly. “Of course—you must go away.”

“As soon as Phronie gets a little stronger, I’ll tell her. And we—you and I must not talk like this again, Roddy. It’s too hard on us. I—I can’t stand it.”

“I know,” he said flatly. “It’s terrible! But I want you to know that I never had any idea what love was like—until this happened.”

“Nobody will ever mean anything to me again, Roddy—after you,” she told him. “You—”

She could not go on. Tears seemed to be running backward, down into her throat, choking her words. With a smothered oath, Roddy flung his arm across the fence, strained her desperately to him for a moment, then released her and turned abruptly away, swept up the hamper and strode down the edge of the field as though he were half blind.

Silver moved back into the grassy pasture, knelt down and began picking berries for Sophronia, gathering leaves and flowers indiscriminately with

hands that shook.



CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

DAY followed day, and the sky over the parched and livid land became like a dome of colorless metal, all the blue beaten out of it by the intense heat. Fears that had smoldered separately throughout the district, stole out, linked, and became flaming panic. But the drought was only a fore-runner of a graver holocaust.

In Fjelstad's Feed and Implement Store, Roddy Willard talked with Sven Erickson and John Michener. He struggled to conceal the alarm he felt as he spoke.

"The county agent can't be expected to do it all by himself," he said sharply. "It takes just one day for a good army of grasshoppers to eat the chimney off your house!"

Sven shook his head solemnly. "I hear dey are so t'ick in Manitoba dey stop de trains on de tracks," he observed with a click of his tongue.

"I was talking with the agent yesterday," Roddy continued. "Poison bran has been distributed to all the farmers west of here, right to the state line. But some of them don't give a damn, the shiftless bohunks! Their farms are going to be seized for taxes anyhow, so they can't be bothered about saving their crops."

"Joe Fisher came through from Brookings yesterday," Michener observed, "and he had to put chains on his tires. That sounds like a tall one, but Joe swears it's the God's truth! He stopped at a place where a fellow said the hoppers ate the harness off a horse's back—for the salt in the leather. You can take that or leave it."

Roddy thoughtfully rolled a cigarette. "Well, I wouldn't believe Joe even if I knew he was telling the truth. But it's bad enough, anyhow. I disked and harrowed last fall, and I made a thorough inspection of my land this spring for locust eggs. My land is clean. But even poison bait won't keep them from doing a lot of damage before they die—if they begin coming in clouds."

“Course,” Sven observed, “you can’t blame the bohunks. It cost me ten to twenty cents an acre to spread de bait—and dat don’t pay for de vork, eder.”

John Michener and Roddy fell to talking then of the comparative danger of the differential and the lesser migratory grasshoppers, and Sven, to whom a locust was merely a locust and a pest, listened eagerly.

“Darn it, anyhow,” Michener said at last, his expletive rather humorous in his deep voice, “if it would only rain! It gathered up fine yesterday, and then sailed off again to the north. A couple more days like this and there won’t be enough left for a grasshopper’s lunch.”

“Vell—I s’pose dey starve to death, den,” Sven observed.

The searing heat continued and in a few days the earth, from the top of the Willard hill, looked like one great mottled leaf curled up at the edges, the dry atmosphere giving the horizon a scalloped effect. Silver, who had gone in the afternoon to the brushwood above the farmstead in quest of a breath of air, gazed down into the shallow valley below with a sinking heart.

The door of the stone house opened and Sophronia came out, walking slowly, unsteadily still, up the slope toward the barns. Yesterday she had ventured as far as the chicken-house for the first time. Silver had made an effort to tell her, only last night, that she had written to Benjamin Hubbard in Chicago and that he had secured a position for her. But just at the moment when she might have spoken, Sophronia’s head had dropped forward over her crocheting and the gray exhaustion of her face had filled Silver with an alarm that prevented her uttering a word of her plans.

The leaves of the poplars above her rustled sharply, but the breeze that moved them was like a gust from an oven. Silver got to her feet and saw in the cornfield to the east the gray-white wave of air moving over the pale, brittle tassels. The heat licked over the field like horrid little tongues of dull fire. Between the large field and the pasture on the south, lay Roddy’s plot of hand-pollinated corn. Every day for the past week he had been hauling barrels of water down from the windmill and watering that small tract as though it were a flower out of his very heart.

Silver paused in the dry grass half way down to the yard. Suddenly every fibre of her being was alert to a sound in the air that was more than the burning flow of the wind. She knew at once that the sound had been present from the moment when she had gone up the hill, that her preoccupation with her own thoughts had shut it out. It was a brisk drone, muffled and yet somehow sharp, as a keen sound might strike on the ear of a person partly

deaf. Silver glanced apprehensively about her, then upward at the sun. It seemed now that the hot chatter in the air was increasing in volume with every second.

She saw Roddy and Steve drive in from the highway in the truck and stop in the shadow of the barns. She hurried back down the hill and into the yard. On the hard, level ground in front of the barn, where a tarpaulin had been spread, Roddy and Steve had dumped a quantity of bran. In a large tin container, old Roderick was mixing water, arsenic and molasses. Sophronia was standing to one side, watching the men.

“Phronie!” Silver cried. “What are you doing out here?”

“Bein’ out here won’t do me as much harm as sittin’ in the house and worryin’,” Sophronia retorted. “Steve, you old galoot, you’re lettin’ that bran run off on the ground, there.”

Silver stepped forward and lifted the edge of the tarpaulin and shook the bran back into place. Then old Roderick poured the arsenic mixture over the pile of bran while Roddy and Steve turned the mash over and over with scoop shovels.

Each then took a corner of the tarpaulin and lifted it into the truck. Roddy climbed up and seated himself at the wheel.

“You get into the house and lie down, Phronie,” Silver commanded severely. “I’m going out and help spread it.”

She climbed into the seat beside Roddy, while Steve and old Roderick stood up on the truck floor behind them.

“You’d better put these gloves on then,” Roddy said, tossing a pair of white cotton gloves into her lap. He did not look at her as he started the engine and drove the truck down over the bumpy slope.

Silver drew the gloves over her hands.

“And don’t let any of this stuff get on your skin,” he admonished further. “It burns.”

“I’ll be careful,” she promised.

They bumped along for some distance in silence.

“Is there something I have to learn—about scattering the bran?” Silver ventured finally.

“There’s a right way and a wrong way,” Roddy told her. “Scatter it in flakes—not in lumps. We don’t want the cattle to get a dose of it. They might uncover it in the fall and cattle don’t thrive on poison, as a usual thing. Just watch the way Steve does it.”

“Cripes!” Steve exclaimed in an awed voice as they came to the edge of the field. “The little devils are on the job, for sure!”

For more than three hours, Roddy drove slowly over the fallow fields and the wild-hay meadows, over sod land and weedy ground, and back and forth at regularly spaced intervals across the great cornfield, crushing down stalks that must be sacrificed. Old Roderick, Steve and Silver, standing up in the truck, cast the flakes of mash into the wind with a sharp snap of the wrist as Roddy had cautioned them to do.

The air had become infested as though by a swift, green-brown hail which swept horizontally along the earth. The hysterical sound of the advancing hordes of insects individualized itself hideously on the senses, and in the scorching heat seemed, to Silver, to be burrowing into her brain. The grasshoppers, in their insane, headlong flight, battered themselves against the sides of the truck, dashed with the sting of pebbles into the very faces of the riders. And constantly, up and down the succulent stalks of corn, the appalling myriads moved with small, ferocious alacrity, incredible greed.

From time to time, Roddy swore softly under his breath, or burst out anew in futile wrath at the lackadaisical farmers to the westward who had not done their share in helping to stop the advance of the plague.

“There’s not much use in losing your temper, son,” his father observed. “You can thank your stars that pet field of yours is far enough south of here to get the tail end of the business. They’ll be half dead by the time they get over there.”

“They’ll do enough, anyhow, even there,” Roddy replied dourly.

“You sprinkled it good and plenty last night, didn’t you?” old Roderick asked.

“Plenty,” Roddy replied. “I was at it until after midnight.”

“Well, this tribe won’t go far past our own land, that’s a cinch!” Steve put in. “Old man Flathe will thank us, if nobody else does.”

Roddy glanced up at Silver and saw that her face was white and drawn under the superficial flush caused by the heat.

“Here, kid! You look about ready to drop!” he cried with dismay. He turned the truck about and started more rapidly in the direction of the pasture below the hill. “You get out here, now,” he said, “and run home. I don’t know what I’ve been thinking about! Beat it!”

Silver got down unsteadily and started off.

“Look in on Corinne,” Roddy called after her. “She wasn’t feeling so well when I left the house.”

Silver found Corinne in her room upstairs, in a pitiful huddle on her bed, the counterpane drawn over her head and shoulders.

“Corrie!” Silver said gently as she seated herself on the side of the bed. “You’ll die here, in this heat.”

There was no response save for the muffled sound of the girl’s sobbing. Silver’s patience suddenly left her.

“Here—pull yourself together!” she said severely. “It’s no worse for you than it is for the rest of us.”

The counterpane was flung violently aside and Corinne sat up. Her tear-stained face worked spasmodically. She pointed to a ragged object on the floor.

“Look at that sweater!” she stormed. “I left it out on the lawn. Look at it! They’ve made a sieve out of it!”

Silver picked up the garment and began to laugh.

Corinne turned upon her. “Laugh! What’s so funny about it?” she shrieked. “My God—I feel as though my very eyes have been eaten out! And you can laugh!”

“I can’t help it, Corinne,” Silver confessed. “I was just thinking of what they’re doing to Roddy’s cornfield.”

She threw the tattered sweater into a chair.

Corinne clutched her cheeks. “Oh, my God, what a life! Listen to them—banging against the windows. I can’t stand it—I can’t—”

But Silver had seized her wrists and, with a choking gasp, Corinne’s frenzied cries stopped.

“Listen to me, Corinne,” Silver said firmly. “You get out of bed and take a cold shower and come down to the other house. You can’t go on like this. Everybody feels crazy enough without your carrying on like a two-year-old.”

But Corinne recoiled in sullen obstinacy. “I’ll not stir out of this house today. Go away and leave me alone.”

After a moment, Silver got up from the bed and started toward the door.

Corinne sprang suddenly to her feet. “What do you mean by going to Gerald Lucas and talking to him about me?” she demanded.

Silver paused and turned to look at her. “Did Gerald tell you that?” she asked.

“Why shouldn’t he tell me!”

“I thought he’d have more sense, that’s all,” Silver replied.

Corinne laughed contemptuously. “I should think you’d have more sense than to interfere in my affairs. It’s really funny—you and Roddy—the salt of the earth—trying to reform me.” Her mood changed abruptly. “I’ll not have it. I’ll live my own life—as I want to live it—and I don’t want any missionary work on my behalf—by you or anyone else. From now on, please remember—”

“Corinne!” Silver interrupted agitatedly, and stepped toward her. “I’m not trying to reform you. I was simply trying to appeal to Gerald’s decency.”

“Decency! What does anyone in this place know about decency? Roddy had his chance to be decent. He could have taken me out of this hole last January—if he could have thought of anyone but himself.”

Silver stared at her incredulously. “Corinne,” she stammered, “does Roddy’s love for this land mean nothing to you?”

Corinne, her eyes glinting, looked shrewdly at Silver. “How much does it mean to you?” she asked.

Silver’s cheeks burned suddenly. “So much—that I have changed my mind about selling my land this summer,” she said quietly. “Roddy can stay on as long as he likes, so far as I am concerned. I’m going back to Chicago as soon as Phronie is strong enough to let me go.”

A lightning change came over Corinne’s face. “Well!” she breathed. “So that’s the next thing. That means—we’ll be here next winter and—for the rest of our lives, then. What made you change your mind?”

In the parched air, Silver felt strangely cold. “Nothing *made* me change my mind, Corinne,” she said haltingly. “I—I just couldn’t go through with it.”

Corinne sank down upon the bed. “Oh—what’s the use!” she sobbed. “I’ve done my best—but you’re all against me—because you all hate me!”

Silver looked at her half in sympathy and half in anger.

“Don’t be such a fool,” she said, then stepped to the edge of the bed and laid a hand gently on Corinne’s shoulder. “Does Roddy’s affection mean nothing to you?”

“Affection!” Corinne cried. “Don’t talk to me about affection. What can you know about it? I’m losing my mind in this hell—and you talk to me about affection. Leave me alone! Go away!”

“Won’t you come down to the other house later?” Silver persisted.

“I’m not going anywhere. Don’t talk to me!” Corinne shrilled.

And Silver, thinking of Sophronia, went without a word out of the room.

But that evening, before the men had come in from the fields, Silver saw Corinne getting into Roddy's car in front of the big house. The details of her dress became instantly vivified against the soft glow of the descending sun. Corinne, in her drooping leghorn hat and her sheer batiste frock, was, to Silver, a design of beauty suddenly superimposed upon a wry background of disaster.



CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

IN less than two days, the invading army of locusts had been almost completely destroyed and the hot, brooding air was full of an awesome peace. But it was the peace of death. The Willards' huge cornfield had been converted into a shambles of maimed and ugly stalks, and every green thing had been at least partially gnawed and worried as though with a pair of small, blunt scissors, although—as Roddy kept repeating with grateful emphasis—enough of the ears had been spared to provide seed for another year.

On the following Friday evening, Jason and Paula drove down in time to have dinner with the old folks. Sophronia, feeling more like herself now, determined to make their visit an occasion for bringing the family together.

“We’ll celebrate!” she announced. “There’s been enough grief around here the past two weeks, Lord knows! What with me dyin’ and the crops burnin’ up and the hoppers eatin’ what’s left, there hasn’t been much celebratin’ in this place. I’ll ask Roddy and Corinne to come down for supper and bring old Steve along.”

Paula and Silver and Sophronia went to the kitchen to prepare the meal and left Jason and old Roderick to themselves in the living room, where they reviewed the ravages the district had suffered from the plague. Silver herself delivered Phronie’s invitation to Corinne and returned at once to help with the supper and to talk with Paula.

When they were ready to sit down at last, Sophronia went to the window and looked out.

“There they are now,” she said. “We’ll get the things on the table, Silver.” She hesitated and thrust her face closer to the window. “Where’s Corinne, I wonder? She isn’t with Roddy and Steve.”

“Probably putting on her best dress for the occasion,” old Roderick suggested.

In a moment Roddy stepped into the house and greeted Jason and Paula.

“What’s keepin’ Corinne?” Sophronia inquired. “Supper’s ready to go on.”

Roddy frowned. “She’s not coming,” he said.

Sophronia folded her hands in her apron. “She’s not comin’? What’s the matter, then?”

Roddy made a gesture of dismissal. “Don’t ask me, ma! Gosh, I give up trying to understand women.”

“Do you mean she’s goin’ to stay up there at the house by herself?” Sophronia persisted.

“She was ready to come down with me when she told me that she would have to leave immediately after supper to go over to Harry Richter’s place. I told her it might be a good idea if she moved her things over there—and she went off into one of her tantrums. I can’t do anything about it.”

Steve slumped into a chair. “We’ll get along without her, I reckon,” he grumbled.

“Steve!” old Roderick rebuked him.

“Well—let’s sit in, then,” Sophronia ordered.

They took their places at once and Sophronia forbade any talk of the plague or the hard times that loomed ahead.

“Let’s have one cheerful night together,” she said sturdily.

“Gosh, ma,” Roddy spoke up, “you don’t leave us much to talk about.”

“We might give our ideas of what kind of a grandfather we’re going to make out of pa,” Jason suggested, with a wink at Paula.

“He’ll be pretty green at it for a while,” Roddy laughed.

“I might have had a little practice, my lad,” old Roderick retorted, “if you’d done your duty.”

Silver glanced at Roddy and caught the look of embarrassment that darkened his face as the others laughed.

“Hold your tongues, now—all of you!” Sophronia spoke up. She turned to Silver. “I clean forgot the jar of pickles I set out. I wish you’d bring them in. I’m fair run off my feet.”

Silver was grateful for the opportunity to leave the table.

“How are those young Herefords standing the hot weather, Jase?” Roddy asked.

And so the talk turned easily to the small concerns of the farm.

On the following morning, Silver went to the Michener farm to spend the day with Freda. She left before anyone in the stone house had heard of what had happened in Gerald Lucas's "back room" the night before.

But when she stopped for a moment in Heron River to buy some peppermints for old Grandma Michener, Haber's store was buzzing with the news. Dave Erickson, who was in the store at the time, drew Silver aside.

"This Lucas used to be a friend of yours, didn't he?" he asked with some embarrassment.

"Yes," Silver replied. "What has happened, Dave?"

Dave tilted his hat and scratched his blond head. "Well, it might have been worse, of course. Two fellows from Minneapolis got into a poker game over at the club last night. There was a row and one of them pulled a gun and plugged the other one. He didn't do much damage, I understand, but the news has leaked out and the cops will be on Lucas's neck before night. Mr. Lucas will have to get out—and *fast*—or he'll be taken in before he's another day older."

As though she had been there, Silver swiftly reconstructed the scene. Gerald could afford no such publicity, no investigation. He would have to get out immediately. Silver was all too familiar with the procedure in such circumstances.

"I see," she said absently.

But she had become quite unconscious of Dave's elaboration of the episode. One thought occupied her mind. With Gerald safely out of the way, there would still be a chance of Corinne's becoming reconciled to her life with Roddy. It was all working out for the best, of course. And next week Silver would be leaving to take the position that was open to her in Chicago. Sophronia had been curiously resigned last night when Silver had told her of her decision to go away.

"I think I understand, child," she had said, in a voice that was all sadness. And it was Silver who had cried.

By midafternoon, the sky was a sullen, gray-white glare of heat, and the leaves of the Micheners' shade trees drooped like flakes of lead. A new and sinister stillness pervaded the air, a sort of hushed and unwholesome waiting. Although there was not a cloud in sight, low in the west there was a curious humid depth of blue, as though the paint from a water-color had run down and settled.

"It's goin' to storm!" Grandma Michener predicted.

Silver was preparing to leave for home when Phil Michener came back from Maynard. The incident at the Emerald Bay Club had been the talk of

the town during the day.

“Strikes me,” Phil added, “Roddy ought to keep that pretty wife of his away from such places—though that’s his business, not mine.”

“Corinne wasn’t over there last night?” Silver put in.

“She was there with the Richters,” Phil told her.

Silver bade a hurried farewell and started for home. As she spurred Rusty over the short-cut and through the fields, she found herself shivering with some nameless apprehensiveness that had no connection with the approaching storm. Here and there alongside the grassy, almost unused road, the cottonwood leaves rustled fitfully, as if in some secret agitation, for it could not be the glazed, dead air that stirred them.

The light was subtly changing. The effect of it was rather that of looking at an eclipse of the sun through a blue glass. And when Silver finally turned her horse into his own pasture, the western horizon had swollen into a blue-black, monstrous reef.

There was no one in the yard as she approached Roddy’s house. Roddy and Steve, Silver knew, were cutting hay in the south field, almost a mile away. The whirr of the mower came faintly on the dead stillness of the late afternoon.

In the driveway, before the door of the big house, stood Roddy’s car. As Silver passed it, she glanced into it and saw a large black suitcase lying across the seat. Could Corinne possibly be planning to go somewhere with the storm coming on?

She flung open the kitchen door and almost collided with Corinne—hatted and gloved, and wearing a tailored dark silk dress suitable for travelling. In one hand she carried a small leather case and her purse. Under her other arm snuggled Macbeth, her red Pomeranian. These details Silver took in with alarmed comprehension.

“Where in the world are you going, Corinne?” she asked. “Don’t you see there’s a storm coming up?”

Corinne laughed nonchalantly, although her eyes flamed in reckless defiance. “I haven’t time to tell you,” she replied. “I have to hurry. . . . What are you doing? Let me go!”

Her voice rose to a piercing shriek as Silver seized her and forced her violently into a chair.

“For God’s sake, Corinne!” Silver panted. “Have you lost your senses completely?”

“Take your hands off me!” Corinne burst out. She had gone white with fury as she struggled to release herself.

Silver dropped Corinne’s arms and stepped back from her, aghast and bewildered. “Are you going away with Gerald Lucas?” she demanded.

“This is none of your business!” Corinne fumed as she sprang from the chair. “I know what I’m doing. I haven’t time to talk to you—even if I wanted to!”

She started again toward the door, but Silver barred her way.

“How dare you interfere with me?” Corinne stammered, with something of her old imperious manner, which was to Silver merely pathetic now. “You must be crazy—”

“It’s you who are crazy,” Silver interrupted coldly.

Corinne seemed to regain control of herself. “Think what you like,” she said in a calmer tone. “I have never cared much about what you think of me, anyhow.” She pushed back her sleeve with a trembling hand and glanced at her watch. “All I want now is to get away. That’s all I’ve wanted from the first day I came here. I’ve left a note telling Roddy he can find the car in front of Haber’s store. Let me pass, please!”

Silver did not move from her place before the door. “I can’t let you go—like this.”

“Have your own way, then,” Corinne told her. “I’ll go out by the front door.”

Silver burst suddenly into tears and clung to Corinne.

“Corrie—I implore you! Don’t do this to yourself! I know what life with Gerald will be. I’ve seen enough of it—I’ve been through it. Your life will be ruined. Corinne, darling—please—I won’t let you go!”

Silver caught her arm, but Corinne, with a sharp little jerk of her body, disengaged herself. Her small, piquant face was frozen with determination. She looked suddenly years older.

“I tell you—I don’t care!” she cried desperately. Her head was proud and high. “I can’t let him go away alone. I realized that last night when he told me he would have to leave. I love him—and he loves me.” For an appalling moment her face became almost shrewish. “If I don’t like the way Gerald lives, perhaps I can make something worth while out of him—and I couldn’t do that for Roddy Willard!”

Before Silver could reach her, Corinne had darted into the front room and out of the door. Silver ran after her, sobbing, pleading, clutching at her

in despair, but Corinne, in stony, inexorable silence, climbed into the car and drove away.

Silver looked wildly after her, and stood for a moment with her hand pressed frantically against her mouth. She was vaguely aware that it had grown much darker, that the earth seemed enclosed in an airless, suffocating sphere. Then she stamped her foot and brushed the tears impatiently from her eyes.

“Go, then—you damned little idiot!” she said aloud as she saw the car pass through the gateway and gather speed in the open road.

Suddenly there came into her mind the clamoring necessity of finding Roddy. The distance to the hayfield seemed immeasurable as she went running, stumbling, plunging to no avail again and again over the entangling meshes of grass, over the familiar and the treacherous ruts of a fallow field which was wavering strangely now with livid patches of shadow. She paused and glanced over her shoulder to reassure herself that she had come at least half way, when there came a sound that was a shrill, demoniacal whine, followed by a roar that stunned all thought.

Then the rain came.

The rain, the rain, the blessed rain! Silver threw her arms wide and laughed in sheer pagan joy as the rich, drowning flood of it descended upon her. It washed away all drought and hunger and defeat; it washed all error from the human heart and wrong thinking from the human mind.

The rain ceased as suddenly as it had begun. Presently, from the direction of the Willard hill, Silver saw a dark shape plunging toward her. It was Roddy.

“What the devil are you doing out here?” he demanded as he came within speaking distance.

“I started out to find you—when the rain came,” she replied haltingly.

“We hit the house when we saw it coming,” he said.

“You’ve been home—you’ve found Corinne’s letter?” she asked.

“I found it,” he replied in a clipped tone.

“I tried to stop her, Roddy. I fought with her—but I couldn’t do anything. Then I ran—to get you—so that you could go after her—before it was too late.”

Roddy smiled bitterly. “Hell—they’ve gone to Mexico!” he said. “That’s too far away for me.”

“You’re going to let her go?”

“It isn’t as bad as it looks, kid,” he said slowly. “Corinne really left me—months ago. But—come along. Steve is out looking for you, and Phronie is having fits because you’re not in the house.”

He put his arm about her gently and they walked in silence toward the house. To the eastward, lightning strode across the sky, and all about them the air quaked with thunder.

“Don’t you think too much about this, Silver,” Roddy said steadily as they walked across the field. “I’m giving Corinne a chance to live the life she wants to live. I’ve known, what she wanted—but I’ve never been able to give it to her. I was a damned fool, I guess. But there’s something I want to tell you—Corinne is really in love with Lucas. I have suspected it all along, but when she came home last night—there was something about her—a sort of glory in her face that I’ve never seen there before. I asked her about Lucas and she told me she loved him. There wasn’t anything I could do about it, kid. I told her she could go when she felt like it.”

Silver’s heart beat so rapidly that she could make no reply. They made their way across the field until they came parallel with Roddy’s experimental tract of corn. The sky was lifting now as though the lid were being raised from a casket of glowing jewels. Green and gold and blue, in a cleansed and hollowed world—it cast over the heart a spell of awe and wonder.

On this, the south side of the field, the locusts had done very little damage. And now, after the rain, the stalks stood tall and fine, the snug, firm ears glistened, and the leaves flowed with beauty.

Silver, her eyes upon the field, thought of Corinne. “How could she go away from this, Roddy—and take a chance on the life—”

Roddy smiled down at her. “Life’s a gamble—wherever you live it, Silver,” he said. “It’s when you live it with someone you love that makes the difference.”

He took her shoulders in his hands, turned her about and looked through almost a year of frustration, despair and defeat—into the serenity of Silver’s eyes.

And across his shoulder, Silver saw a rainbow above the land.

THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

[The end of *There's Always Another Year* by Martha Ostenso]